

Faculty of Natural Sciences Undergraduate Academic Student Staff Committee

Date: Wednesday 16th June 2021

Time: 12.30 – 14.00

Location: via Microsoft Teams

MINUTES

Present:

Daniyar	Ghani (DG)	Chair, RCSU Vice President (Education)
John	Seddon (JS)	Faculty Senior Tutor
Matt	Horsfield (MH)	Secretary and Education Support Coordinator
Nazia	Hirjee	Faculty Operations Officer
Rebecca	Middleton (RM)	Faculty Education Manager
Yasmin	Andrew (YA)	Student Liaison Officer, Physics
Steve	Connolly (SC)	Life Sciences - UG Liaison Officer
Inkeri	Hibbins (IH)	UG Liaison Officer, Mathematics
Aparna	Pillai (AP)	RCSU President
Maria-Ileana	Borc (MIB)	RCSU Vice President (Welfare & Wellbeing)
Michaela	Flegrova (MF)	ICU Deputy President (Education)
Carl	Paterson (CP)	Director of Undergraduate Studies, Physics
Huw	Williams (HW)	Director of Undergraduate Studies, Life Sciences
Donald	Craig (DC)	Director of Undergraduate Studies, Chemistry
Andres	Martin Diaz (AMD)	Chemistry: Department Representative
Jeong	Yoon (JY)	Biology: Department Representative
Tony	Lin (TL)	Mathematics: Year One Academic Representative
Amir	Rahman	Mathematics: Year Two Academic Representative
Priscilla	Yip (YP)	Mathematics: Year Two Academic Representative
Zhidong	Zuo	Physics: Year Two Academic Representative
Shi	Yuan	Physics: Year Two Academic Representative
Skok	Pia	Biochemistry: Year One Academic Representative
Yuqing	Wu (YW)	Physics: Department Representative

Present:

Cat	Turhan	ICU Representation & Advice Manager
Michael	Kohn (MK)	UG FoNS Council Representative
Susan	Rutter (SR)	UG FoNS Council Representative

Apologies:

Richard	Thompson	Co-chair and Vice-Dean (Education)
David	Evans	Director of Undergraduate Studies, Mathematics
Daniel	Jonsson	Physics: Year Three Academic Representative
Amelia	Barron	Student Experience Officer, Chemistry
Sai	Yoghananthan	Student Experience Coordinator, Mathematics
Ella	Robson	Student Experience Coordinator, Mathematics
Sachin	Yuvaraj Dinesh Babu	Biological Sciences: Year One Academic Representative
Tianyu	Wen	Biochemistry: Year Two Academic Representative
Nicolas	Barykin Pankevich	Mathematics: Department Representative
Isabelle	Zhang	Biochemistry: Department Representative
Carlos	Cardoso Correia Perello	Mathematics: Year One Academic Representative
Sean	Collins	Biological Sciences: Year One Academic Representative
Stefano	Fiocca	Physics: Year One Academic Representative

1. Welcome and Apologies

DG welcomed all and apologies as above were accepted.
Confirmed that the meeting was being recorded on Teams.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 17th March 2021

The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the previous meeting held on 17th March 2021.

3. Matters arising from the minutes and Review of Action Tracker

The action tracker was reviewed, and actions were marked as complete.

4. Reports from Department Student Representatives:**4.1 Life Sciences – Biochemistry**

No student representatives were present.

4.2 Life Sciences – Biological Sciences

The detailed report document was noted by the committee and JY presented the key matters arising from the report.

- JY confirmed a survey has been sent out to 1st and 2nd year students about teaching arrangements for next academic year.
- Student reps were working on a common room plan with the department to ensure that the room can be used for society meetings and study space for all students.
- JY explained they were working on a plan to encourage participation for online events and personal tutoring sessions. It was noted that this has improved this year for personal tutoring sessions.
- The department have recently set up a culture committee and they plan to include an undergraduate rep.
- JY reported they have held two successful events, mental health discussion with the Head of Department and a pen-pal session. JY had received positive feedback from students.
- JY explained that student reps had been advising students to submit a mitigating circumstance (MC) claim if they have required additional time or support.
- HW confirmed that the college has given the department another year to complete the paperwork for the year three curriculum but there would be some changes to the modules for next year.

4.3 Chemistry

No detailed report document was received. AMD presented a verbal report of the key matters arising in the department.

- AMD reported that he had been working with the department to make sure all online classes were engaging and interesting for students.
- AMD reported that they had organised an informal focus group between 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students to discuss final project/dissertation planning. There was lots of positive feedback from students and they will look to arrange more sessions next year by adding the event to the Chemistry rep calendar.
- At the department committee, there were many positives points raised but students also raised their concerns about the difficulty of the online exams. DC confirmed that marking was still going on so not all provisional marks had been released yet. Once all marks had been released, the department would be able to investigate the distribution

of marks to see if the online exams have impacted student grades. DC confirmed this would be discussed at the exam board.

- AMD explained that students would appreciate more mock/practice exam papers in order to be more familiar with changes to the open book format and the curriculum review.
- AMD reported there had been lots of positive feedback from the students about how the department has communicated with students over the year and provided student feedback. DC confirmed that the department was in the process of contacting all continuing students to gather their feedback on online learning.

4.4 Mathematics

No detailed report document was received. YP presented a verbal report of the key matters arising in the department.

- YP reported that students had raised their concerns about the difficulty of online exams.
- YP and TL reported positive feedback from students about the elective module fair to provide students with a better understanding of electives they can pick from.

4.5 Physics

No detailed report document was received. YW presented a verbal report of the key matters arising in the department.

- YW reported that students in the department felt like the recent online exams were harder than previous exam periods. The department was aware of these concerns and had been advising students that this would be discussed at the upcoming exam board.
- YW reported the department had organised an elective module fair for continuing students. Students provided positive feedback and suggested that this should be organised in the future again.
- CP confirmed that once the exams had been marked, the marks would be examined in line with university regulations to investigate the distribution of marks. CP also discussed the impact of online exams when taken from home compared to a standard exam on the university campus.
- CP congratulated the 1st year department reps in organising social events for new students.
- YA confirmed the department had been collecting feedback from students about the online exams. YA also confirmed that a staff/student forum had been organised once exams were completed to allow students to ask questions to senior members of academic staff about the teaching arrangements for next year and the online exams.
- Two workshops were planned for the summer to collect feedback on blended learning to improve the teaching experience for next year.

5. ICU Teaching/Open Book Exam Survey Results

5.1 Open Book Exam

- SR introduced herself and MK as the undergraduate Council reps for the Faculty.
- SR explained the purpose of the survey was to collect student feedback about the online exams from all students across the Faculty. In total they collected 198 responses from students.
- Feedback in general was quite mixed with more positive feedback from students in Life Sciences about the open book format and the use of essay-based questions. Across all departments, concerns were raised about; the difficulty of papers, lack of consistency between papers, academic misconduct and students accessing papers from different time zones. Each department was discussed by MK alongside the student responses. Key responses can be

viewed below in table 1 and table 2. MK raised his concerns about the number of responses which referred to their mental wellbeing being affected by the online exams.

Table 1

Department	Positive Responses	Neutral Responses	Negative Responses	Total Response (per department)
Life Sciences	31	3	20	54
Chemistry	9	4	24	37
Mathematics	15	9	28	52
Physics	1	0	54	55

Total 198

Table 2

Department	Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Life Sciences	Open book format, no longer memory-based questions.	Students in different time zones were not considered. No clear marking standard.
Chemistry	Memory of formulas no longer required.	Insufficient time to complete exam.
Mathematics	1 st year students thought there was a good set of questions and less focus on no longer memory-based questions.	Pure Maths students struggled and felt disadvantaged in their department. Found whole exam process very stressful.
Physics		Insufficient time to complete exam. Style of questions were very different to previous exam papers. Lack of guidance when preparing for exams.

- DG invited all members of the committee to discuss the results.
- JY commented that the response rate for Life Sciences was quite small and she had heard mixed reviews from students in the department. JY queried if the survey would be sent out again and MK confirmed there were no plans to send this out again. AP queried if the ICU would be sending out a survey once the summer exams were completed. MF confirmed the ICU will be sending out a survey at the end of June.
- DC went through the feedback for Chemistry and explained that the spike in 2nd year students was in line with the feedback they have received directly. DC discussed the idea of exam workshops which had been requested by the students, but the department would rather teach students through a series of problem-based seminars and other activities. DC explained to the committee that because of the curriculum review, students had no access to past papers for the modules they were taking but the module leaders did go through the past papers to show students what questions would be relevant to the new modules. Specimen papers were also provided to all students in the department. DC confirmed the department would be likely using online exams for the summer exams and exams in January 2022.
- SR raised her concerns about the impact hard exam questions had on students during the exam period and some questions were perceived as not being relevant to the module content or the overall course. AP noted that students from across the Faculty did not feel prepared to take their exams online and resulted in the poor survey feedback. MF added that students believed the past papers were not relevant to the exam and did not help students preparing for the new open book format exams.
- SC made some comments on students' perception of the difficulty of the exams this year, stating his belief that the exams were different, not more difficult. A number of committee

members responded to these comments both verbally and in the meeting chat. Many argued that students' feedback, opinions, and the way that they feel during and after an exam was very relevant and should be taken seriously. Students particularly noted that undertaking an exam that they perceive to be far more difficult than any other exam they have taken previously could be detrimental to students' wellbeing, and some students had reported having panic attacks during exams this year. It was noted that the fact that students felt the exams to be more difficult will be apparent when the results are reviewed at the Examination Boards.

- IH explained that the exams were not intended to be more difficult this year but the circumstances they were under were very different as the majority of teaching had been delivered online. IH agreed that departments need to listen to the student feedback to help plan for next year with how exams might be run. IH confirmed all student feedback would be taken to the exam board to discuss with the moderation panel.
- CP confirmed that the Physics department do not want to continue with online exams next year and will plan to maximise exams onsite. CP discussed that the department would like to move forward with some of the positives with online learning and will explore the benefits of open book exams. It was agreed that department could only reviews the process once marks had been confirmed and released.

5.2 ICU Teaching

- DG confirmed the teaching survey was designed to collect student feedback on online learning and multi-mode teaching across the Faculty. There was mixed feedback on lecture delivery. An equal number of students enjoyed online lectures compared to those students who did not. There was some positive feedback for office hours and information sessions, but the remaining feedback was negative.
- DG reported that the majority of students would prefer face-to-face lectures on campus rather than online lectures. Feedback also suggested that students would prefer all other sessions, such as computer labs, to be in person on campus.
- DC confirmed that Chemistry would continue with asynchronous lectures and would maximise in person activities on campus. The department is looking to learn from some of the positives from online learning, such as live discussion boards.
- CP confirmed that Physics would move all interactive sessions, such as labs and seminars, on site for next academic year and would use a blended learning approach for the lectures.

6. Standing Items

6.1 Curriculum Review (CR)

- Discussed in earlier action points.

6.2 Feedback on Assessment

- Discussed in earlier action points.

6.3 NSS Action Plans

- Discussed in earlier action points.

7. Chair's business

- DG had no matters to raise.

8. Minutes of Departmental Student Staff Committee Meetings (to note)

No Minutes recorded.

RM reminded department staff to email minutes to MH as secretary.

9. Any other business

RM congratulated DG on his role as chair for his final committee.

10. Dates of Future Meetings

Committee	Date	Time	Call for Papers	Paper Deadline
FoNS - UG Academic Student Staff Committee	10/11/2021	12.30 – 14.00		
FoNS - UG Academic Student Staff Committee	16/03/2022	13.00 – 14.30		
FoNS - UG Academic Student Staff Committee	15/06/2022	12.30 – 14.00		