

# UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

## School of GeoSciences

### Staff/Student Liaison Committee Meeting

Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2012  
Room 304, Crew Building, 12.30pm

### AGENDA

**Present:** Dr Andy McLeod (Convener), Dr Barbra Harvie, Dr Richard Ennos, Dr Gail Jackson, James Watt (PoE), Makrina Diakaki (2<sup>nd</sup> Year EES), Ivan Paspaldzhiev (2<sup>nd</sup> Year EES)

**In attendance:** Emma Latto (Student Support Coordinator), Meredith Corey (Programme Secretary)

**Apologies:** Dr Kate Heal, Prof Maurizio Mencuccini, Dr Mark Parrington, Dr Caroline Nichol, Prof John Moncrieff, Dr Ron Wilson, Christie Paterson (1<sup>st</sup> Year), Adam Searle (EMP), Zoe Booth (PoE)

#### 1. **Welcome and Apologies**

The Convener welcomed everyone to the first Staff/Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) Meeting of the year and noted the apologies sent.

#### 2. **2<sup>nd</sup> Year Ecological and Environmental Sciences (EES)**

**Year Reps: Makrina Diakaki, Ivan Paspaldzhiev**

The PoE class rep and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Reps had done a survey earlier in the week of students in the class and across second year [results attached].

##### **2.1 Principles of Ecology (PoE)**

**Class Rep: James Watt**

The Convener invited JW to make any comments regarding the course.

The main points raised by students in the class:

- The overlap in material between the animal physiology portion of PoE and Biology, Ecology and Environment (BEE) – the same lecturer taught both that portion of PoE and BEE and some the identical slides were used for both courses. As both courses were compulsory for EES students, it felt very redundant.

GJ said that this was a new issue and that she had not known about this before. MD suggested that it would make sense for the BEE lectures to change, as PoE was an established course and BEE was new. AM asked if there was any overlap between BEE and Sustainability, Society and Environment. All student reps agreed that there was not, saying the courses were very different. IP noted that he would like to see more wider environmental issues addressed in PoE.

- The timing of the practicals – students were often out after dark and that there was also an issue with living samples dying in the lab before students had the opportunity to study them because students had to leave when the labs shut at 5pm.

GJ responded saying that this was an on-going issue and she fully agreed with the students. AM noted that the Course Organiser had tried to move the timing of the practicals this year, but had been unable to due to lack of lab space in the mornings. GJ said that she was planning to contact the School's Health and Safety Officer about the issue of practical times and was hoping this would have more influence on being able to move the sessions to the morning.

**Action: GJ to contact Health and Safety Officer**

- The level of difficulty of the course appeared to be right, with the majority of students saying it was 'appropriate'. The Class Rep said that the course was engaging to students and related to their interests.
- The statistics portion of PoE – some members of the class had suggested that stats should be introduced in first year or at least assessed in PoE. The Class Rep suggested that the overall coursework mark could include a stats component. He said that some students did not attend the stats sessions because they knew they would not be examined on it.

RE said that he could speak with GJ about adding a stats question to the exam from next year. Regarding student attendance, RE said that it was up to students to attend the lectures to learn and lecturers were not there to force them. He noted that stats had already been brought down from fourth year to third and now to second and that there was a problem with addressing it too early, as without actual data of their own to analyse, students struggled to take stats on board. He said it needed to be part of a practical project, which was why it had been added to PoE. He noted that there had been discussion about adding it to Quantification in the Life Sciences.

- Group work and individual submissions – student were unsure why, if the practical work was done as a group, students submitted individual reports.

RE said this was because individuals in the same group produced very different reports of varying quality on the same material.

- Some of the successional lectures should focus more on concepts, rather than case study examples.

GJ said she had not had this feedback from students before, but would think about it. She felt that she included a strong conceptual portion in those lectures.

- GJ said that there had been serious issues with the technology in the JCMB 6301, where Monday morning lectures were held, which caused them to start late and made her rush through the lectures to complete them on time. She recorded an apology to the students about this. JW said that he knew this issue impacted on student attendance, as he had heard students saying it was not worth attending class if the technology was not going to work.

**Action: AM to ask TO Manager to contact relevant people about the room issues**

## **2.2 Field Ecology**

- MD said that the class felt that the information on the course was given out too late, especially as regarding costs and dates. She suggested holding a meeting

in Semester 1 to let students know that the course was compulsory and the dates and fees.

BH said that all this information was available on DRPS, but MD said she had been unable to find it last year. BH noted that, as the course timing was unusual, if all the information went up early in the year for what was technically a 2013-14 course, it confused both the computer systems and students.

MD asked if the meeting in February for the course could be moved to November. BH said the meeting was held in Semester 2 because she did not have any contact with the Biol Sci (Ecology) students before then and BEE was the first opportunity to speak to them all.

AM said he would remind all Personal Tutors to tell their first year students that Field Ecology was compulsory and would be occurring after the May exam diet.

- **Action: AM to remind PTs about telling 1<sup>st</sup> year students about Field Ecology**
- IP said that there was not clear information for the students ahead of time on what was covered on the course and the EES students were unsure what to expect. BH said that, again, all that information was available on DRPS. JW said he felt DRPS was a really under-utilised resource and that they should try to push students to use it more.
- MD said, otherwise, Field Ecology was a great course and JW agreed.

### **2.3 Year-wide issues**

IP said there were no big issues to raise regarding second year, as there was only the one mandatory course, addressed above. From the survey sent out, the main points raised were:

- Lack of course options that fit with taking Soil, Water and Atmospheric Processes (SWAP). IP said it clashed with a number of other courses that students wanted to take. JW said that SWAP and Environmental Chemistry were held at the same time, which was frustrating for students, as many of them wanted to take both courses.
- IP said it would be good to have more management course options for students in first and second years, especially for direct-entry students.

GJ said that there should not be any direct-entry EES with Management students because of the lack of appropriate courses for them to take because they had not completed first-year prerequisites. There was one student this year, but this was due to a mistake in the College Office, as GJ had explicitly told Admissions not to allow in any direct-entry students on this degree stream.

**Action: DPC to ask Head of TO to contact College not to allow any direct-entry 2<sup>nd</sup> year EES w/ Management students**

- IP said that some students found it unclear what options they could take, as regarded their potential career paths. MD said that the School of Biological Sciences (SBS) held a meeting with students to review this and thought this might be something EES could introduce in Semester 2 of first year. JW pointed out that some of this was covered in the SGS handbook that students received.

AM said that the problem was with the vast range of options that students could take in first and second year; they could take any course across the University. He said making up any potential timetables for students to meet the wide range of student interests was difficult.

There being no further comments regarding second year courses and issues, the Convener thanked the three student reps for their comments, noting that they were very useful.

### **3. 1<sup>st</sup> Year Ecological and Environmental Sciences**

#### **3.1 Year-wide issues**

Nothing had been submitted to the SSLC at this time by either 1<sup>st</sup> Year Rep.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Reps suggested that it would be nice for first year EES students to have the chance to meet each other early in the year, so they could get to know each other. She said that the Medical Science students had a weekend together in September and it would be nice to have something similar for EES students. JW agreed and said that Field Ecology was really the first opportunity for EES students to bond.

AM noted that this was an issue that the staff were aware of and that they were trying to make sure that all first year EES students felt like a community of ecologists. BH said that in Origin and Diversity of Life, all EES students had been put in the same Thursday practical session to allow them the chance to get to know each other. GJ said that in the past staff had hosted lunches for students to get to know each other, but that only one or two students attended.

AM welcomed suggestions from the students on possible community-building activities for the first years. He also told the students that some PT group meetings may be held by year-group. He suggested that if they were run this way, they might be able to make it more of a social situation, especially for the earlier years.

#### **3.2 Earth Modelling and Prediction**

The Convener said that the class rep and main lecturer had submitted comments to MC to be read out at the meeting, as they both had to send apologies.

- Class Rep: Students generally happy with the course content, lectures and tutorials.  
Lecturer: Smaller lecture rooms much better for class interaction.
- Class Rep: Problems using Excel - the students are not familiar with Excel and get their worst tutorial marks on questions that require it. They suggest it would be better if they had some tutorials on how to use it at the beginning of the course.  
Lecturer: This seems to be a recurring issue with the course. I said I would bring it up with the course organiser.

AM noted that comments about Excel and stats were occurring regularly across courses. He said that he felt that it was an issue even with third year students, as they struggled with stats.

- MD said that RW had run courses in Excel in ILW last year, which were useful for students. She felt that she, generally, was more familiar with Excel because she was doing EES w/ Man., but suggested that for other students it might be good to have workshops in the first few weeks of term to help students who were not familiar with Excel.

BH noted that a major problem with Field Ecology student work was that some students thought they knew Excel, but they did not. She said that these students were unlikely to attend any workshops, as they already felt confident in their abilities.

#### **4. AOCB**

The Convener asked the year reps to please encourage students to collect their marked work from the drawers in the Teaching Office. IP said that the students always received emails from MC letting them know when work was ready for collection, but he was aware that many other students never bothered to get their marked work from the drawers. BH noted that it was frustrating when students did not collect work because students so frequently complained about the lack of feedback.

The Convener also brought to the attention of the student reps the issue of students looking at each other's work in the collection drawers and, in some offices, students had been caught stealing work with the highest marks. He asked the student reps to communicate to their peers that they are welcome to share work once they have collected it, but they are not allowed to look at other students' work without their express permission. If a student wanted a friend to collect their work from the Teaching Office, the student needed to let MC know.

There being no further business regarding first or second year EES, the Convener adjourned the meeting for a brief break at 1:05pm.

**Present:** Dr Andy McLeod (Convener), Dr Barbra Harvie, Dr Richard Ennos, Dr Margaret Graham, Dr Ron Wilson, Lizzie Quick (EM), Sarah Greenwood (NRM), Robin Wild (3<sup>rd</sup> Year Ecol Sci), Andrew McPhaden (EEA), Justina Adomaviciute (4<sup>th</sup> Year Ecol Sci), Calum Morrison (4<sup>th</sup> Year Ecol Sci), Celine Delabre (4<sup>th</sup> Year Ecol Sci), Kristina Simonaityte (4<sup>th</sup> Year Ecol Sci)

**In attendance:** Emma Latto (SSC), Meredith Corey (Programme Secretary)

**Apologies:** Dr Kate Heal, Prof Maurizio Mencuccini, Dr Caroline Nichol, Prof John Moncrieff

**5. Welcome and Apologies**

The Convener welcomed the student reps to the first SSLC Meeting of the year and noted the apologies as before. All student representatives were present for this portion of the meeting.

**6. 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Ecological Science**

**Year Rep: Robin Wild**

**6.1 Ecological Measurement (EM)**

**Class Rep: Lizzie Quick**

- Overall students had few complaints with EM.
- The Class Rep said that the students had found it very helpful to have the first hand-in as an unmarked submission because it meant the assignments could be marked harshly and the students received very thorough feedback.
- AM asked the Class Reps to comment on the third-year group meeting that had been held with PTs to review their feedback on the coursework. LQ reported that she had found it very useful to have the group meeting; after the whole class session, she was able to have a one-on-one meeting with her PT to review her specific feedback. She felt the meeting worked as a model for group meetings.
- The Year Rep said that students had been sent out an email in Freshers Week only one day in advance asking them to go into the lab and complete weighing of Firbush samples. Many students had not realised they had this and requested more advance warning.

AM said that the email sent out was a reminder email because the students at been told at Firbush that they would need to weigh samples during Freshers Week and the email was sent to remind those students who had not done theirs yet. The Year Rep thought that many students may have forgotten about processing their samples and suggested that AM ask the students to sign up for dates when they would complete this.

**6.2 Natural Resource Management (NRM)**

**Class Rep: Sarah Greenwood**

- Overall the course was very good and it was apparent that RW put a lot of work into the course.
- The Class Rep recommended that RW bring in a demonstrator to help with the Excel workshops because it was a large class (38 students) and they needed more help than one person could give.

AM noted this and said that for a class of that size, it was necessary to have someone helping out. RW noted the comment.

### **6.3 Ecological and Environmental Analysis (EEA)**

#### **Class Rep: Andrew McPhaden**

- There had been complaints from students about the fact that the lectures and practicals at the start of the course were disjointed, with the practical session not immediately following-on from the lecture.
- There was confusion in the timetable and it appeared that different copies of the timetable had been circulated. The Class Rep said that, while emails went out trying to clarify this, they were not sent out with enough advance notice.
- The Class Rep said that the class had received an email from the Course Organiser saying that marking on the first assignment would be delayed by one week (pushing it back from three weeks to four), with no clear reason given to the students for the delay. The Year Rep said this was particularly frustrating, as it would have been very useful for the students to have the feedback on that assignment before other assignments were due, which would have been the case, if the marks had been returned on time.
- The Convener asked the Year Rep to comment on what he had heard regarding students wanting to move the exam from May to December. The Year Rep said that generally students were happy to have the exam in May, as it gave them time to review the material and because there were already so many courses that were being examined in December.

RE said he had moved the exam to May when the course was Scientific Enquiry, in order to allow students to have time to assimilate the knowledge and to revise. Two of the 4<sup>th</sup> Year Reps agreed and said it worked well the year before having the exam in May.

- The Year Rep asked if there would be the chance to do tutorials in Semester 2 in order to review work before the EEA exam.

RE said he would post model answers for the exercise online and that there would be a revision session before the exam.

### **6.4 Year-wide issues**

- 29 of the 43 students in the year were taking 4 courses this semester. The Year Rep felt this was high and was probably due to the fact that there were three compulsory courses for most Ecol Sci students in Semester 1 and four for Ecol Sci w/ Management students. He said Ecol Sci w/ Man. students were encouraged to take an optional business course as well, but that he had been unable to find any that fit in with his timetable.

RW agreed completely that four compulsory courses was too many and that students should have a maximum of two compulsory courses per semester. He said that certain courses would need to shift semesters. The Year Rep suggested moving Population and Community Ecology 3 (PCE) to Semester 2 because EM needed to stay in Semester 1 because of the field course component and it was good to run EEA at the same time as EM.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Year Reps said they had brought up this issue last year and the then DPC had said he would do something about it, but nothing had been done.

RE noted that PCE was a SBS course and, therefore, any issues about moving the course would need to be brought up with them.

- Students felt that the number of hand-ins at the end of term was excessive – there were five submissions due within two and a half weeks. Students said this was not enough time to allow them to achieve the standard they wanted on all their work. The Year Rep recommended that the COs to talk to each other to avoid double deadlines, as had occurred earlier in the semester when both EEA and PCE had submissions due on the same day for important coursework.

RW noted that it was common for submissions to be clustered at the end of the semester because it was unfair to ask students to do work before they had completed much of the course.

The Year Rep suggested moving the EEA paper review submission to later in the semester, possibly one week after the current deadline, because as it was due the day before the NRM presentations. He said the other possibility was to move the submission date to Semester 2, as the exam was held in May, anyway. A petition had been circulated in the class to move the deadline for the second EEA submission and 31 out of 48 students in the class had signed it.

RW offered to move the date of the NRM presentation, but noted that all the work for the presentations would have been done ahead of time. The Year Rep acknowledged this, but said because the presentations were given to outside professionals, the students really wanted to give the best presentation they could.

- EEA and NRM both ran similar stats sessions, which was repetitive. The Year Rep suggested that a course like EEA be run in Semester 2 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Year and that the stats portion of PCE be removed. He said students would have found this very useful for EM.

RW said he had not been aware of this overlap before this year.

- Two students raised the issue with Turnitin assignments on Learn, saying that they had been emailed by MC to say they had not submitted when they actually had.

MC noted that this was an issue from one assignment the week before. It appeared to have been a glitch in the software and had been dealt with.

- The Year Rep asked that a list of what dissertations the 4<sup>th</sup> year students were doing be sent out to the 3<sup>rd</sup> years in first semester because students wanted to know what their options were earlier. He noted that some students were interested in social science topics and were finding it difficult to get information on potential topics and supervisors.

## **7. 4<sup>th</sup> Year Ecological Science**

**Field Course / Professional Skills / Land-Atmosphere Interactions /  
Land Use and Water Resources / Land Use Policy / Conservation  
Management**

**Year Reps: Justina Adomaviciute, Calum Morrison, Celine Delabre, Kristina Simonaityte**

CD noted that last year, as 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Reps, they had brought up some of the same issues and felt it was disappointing that nothing had changed.

JA said that they had done a survey of their classmates and would send the summary email to MC.

### **7.1 Ecological Science Field Course**

- There was a strong desire amongst students to get a distribution of marks for assessments because, after the Ecol Sci Field Course assignments were returned, some people felt that grades were clustered at the lower or higher end of marks. The students wanted to see how they ranked compared to others and some students felt they needed this as part of the feedback.

BH said that students were marked against academic criteria, not against their classmates. She said if all students reached the criteria, they all got high marks, if no one did, then the whole class would get low marks. She said that she could not see any benefit for the students of seeing the class distribution. CD felt that marking was not always fair, that work was not always marked to academic criteria, and that marking differed between different markers.

AM reported that his EM students had been given feedback on an unmarked submission. Some students asked him what their mark would have been, had it been marked. He had pointed out that all feedback on the assignment was clear and that was what the students should look at to see what they did wrong, not the mark.

CD said that some staff members gave a lot of constructive feedback, which students could base future work on to improve. She noted that other staff did not really provide sufficient feedback and she thought that might be part of the reason that students wanted the class stats. CD wanted at least half a page of feedback for each assignment and asked that it be written clearly because sometimes it was difficult to read the marker's handwriting.

AM reiterated that all work was marked to an academic standard, meaning that some years, on some courses, no students would get a first. He said the guidelines for mark classifications were clearly provided for students. CD asked if 'academic classification' was what was included in the Honours Handbook and KS and BH confirmed it was.

JA said that it was useful to compare with other students to learn from their mistakes, as well. She asked general class feedback be given for all assessments, so students could know where they fit in. RE said that general feedback was not always useful because it did not apply directly to each student and he found often students did not bother to read it because it was not personalised.

- Students felt the Ecol Sci Field Course assessment criteria were unclear and that they were not given a lot of time to do the project. CD said some people had spent a lot of time on the Field Course write-up, but were marked down for bad implementation of the experiment, but it had not been clear to students what was expected of them in the write-up. She requested that assignment information be clearer. KS said that the students had written reports individually on their group experiment, but the individual marks seemed to cluster around what the group mark had been. CD said the students had been told they would not be marked on implementation. She said the feedback that student who got low-Bs had was that their discussion was of good quality, but the project had not been done well enough, which appeared to go against the criteria set out.

AM said he had looked at the Ecol Sci Field Course marks from previous years because he knew in advance that the Students Reps were going to raise the issue. He found that in years past, when marking was done by the same staff members as this year, that one student in a project group had received a mark 14 points higher for their individual report than the group presentation, while another group member had dropped 10 points on the report. He said looking at the previous marks, it was apparent that, statistically, the concern the students had about the Field Course marks was not an issue. He had spoken with the CO and markers for the group presentation and that students had been marked on the science content, not on presentation skills; therefore, if the science had not been done well, which was the case in some groups, then the individual reports would be lacking too. JA thanked AM for looking into the marks for the course and for the information.

## **7.2 Land Use Policy, Conservation Management, and Land-Atmosphere Interactions**

- Land Use Policy, Conservation Management, and Land-Atmosphere Interactions student feedback was all very positive. Students were happy with the material, found it interesting and up-to-date.

## **7.3 Professional Skills**

- Students felt that Professional Skills was not rigorous enough for a fourth year course. JA said students were not sure what skills they were learning and felt it was repetitious after Scientific Enquiry. She noted that some of the things covered in Professional Skills would have been useful to know earlier.

KS said it would have been good to have a separate stats course earlier in the degree. JA said that some students paid no attention to the stats portion of Professional Skills because they had already decided a dissertation topic and were not going to use stats in their dissertation, so were not bothered to learn it in the course.

## **7.4 Software**

- Students requested that stats be taught using R, rather than MiniTab, because R was used in the field and it was free, meaning that students could use it on their own computers.

Students also requested being taught to use bibliography software, as there were free ones that the students would like to use, if they had the training.

KS suggested that generally it would be good if staff used free programmes that the students could use outside the School.

## 7.5 Course choices and scheduling

- Students felt there was not enough information in second and third year to guide students on what they needed in order to be prepared for certain fourth-year options; in order to find the information, students really needed to dig deep in DRPS. KS said there was not a lot of information on humanities courses and that students wanted more guidance on pre-requisites they may need to take early on in order to take level-10 courses.

RW said that the permutations for potential student course choices were huge and that made it difficult to give too much specific information. He said that he tried to encourage first year students to start thinking about areas of interest and what courses they might like to take in future, in order to make sure they met any potential pre-requisites. He said, as a PT, he did not want to narrow students' choices too early, so that they would have plenty of options open in later years.

JA suggested that PTs could know a bit more about course options outside Ecology. KS was on exchange last year and said at that university, students had been sent emails promoting certain courses.

- CM noted that many students were upset by the timetable clash between Land Use and Water Resources and Principles of GIS because they wanted to take both. He asked that there be better communication between EES and Geography to avoid these sorts of problems.
- Students were very frustrated with how GeoScience Outreach was handled this year, as it was a very popular course and students were suddenly dropped from the course in Week 3 and had to scramble to find another option to take. CD said that students wanted more opportunities to do real-life things like Outreach.

AM said that was a very helpful comment and noted that students wanted more internship opportunities.

MC said that the Student Support Coordinator was putting together a Wiki that would be updated with all relevant internship opportunities.

- Students were upset about the quota which capped numbers on Marine Systems and Policies, as this was a very popular course and many had missed out on the opportunity to take it.
- Many Ecol Sci students wanted to take plant science courses in 4<sup>th</sup> year, but found it difficult because they did not have the background. CD said she was taking Plant Science in Ecology and, while there was no pre-requisite for the course, students really needed a plant biology background. She said that Ecology students would really like to do more plant science, but found the material very difficult and did not want it to affect their overall marks.

## 7.6 General feedback

- KS asked for the chat/discussion function to be enabled for courses on Learn, so that students could interact with each other and staff could make comments to the students.

JA reported the general feeling in fourth year was not good. She said students were not getting enough career guidance, that DoSs had left on sabbatical and their former students felt abandoned, and that students were unhappy with Professional Skills. CD said that a lot of students were stressed because they needed to start making choices about their life and applying for jobs. She said that grades were disappointing and borderline students were already giving up. The general feeling was the students needed support and that they were starting to panic. CD said that students needed more encouragement from the staff.

AM responded to the comments about feeling 'abandoned' He said that was a common feeling for students at the start of fourth year, but that by the end of the year students always felt better and many left with excellent degree grades.

- KS said students were very frustrated with Careers Services. MC noted that there were opportunities offered to the fourth year by the Careers Office, for example, the session run two days before, which less than a quarter of the class attended. Additionally, the PT group meeting for fourth years this semester was specifically geared towards careers and applying for jobs. KS said that the advice given by the Careers Office was too vague and not very helpful; although, she noted that they were very useful in one-on-one sessions.
- RW asked what the student response was to the new PT system. CD said that some students had wanted to stay with the same person who had been their DoS because they did not want to explain any personal issues to another member of staff. AM noted that all of his tutees had found the shift fine and quickly felt comfortable with their new PT. CD said that overall the new system made sense.

## **8. AOCB**

The Convener again asked the year reps to please encourage students to collect their marks work from the drawers in the Teaching Office and also brought to the attention of the student reps the issue of students looking at each other's work in the collection drawers and, in some offices, stealing others' work. He asked the student reps to remind their peers that they are welcome to share work once they have collected it, but they are not allowed to look at other students' work without their express permission.

The Convener thanked all staff and students for attending and said that all points raised at the meeting would be passed at the Ecology Teaching Committee Meeting two days later for discussion.

The meeting closed at 2:20pm.