

School of GeoSciences

Minutes of the Staff/Student Liaison Committee Meeting Wednesday 9th November, 2011, Room 304, Crew Building

12.30 p.m.

Staff Members Present:

Prof Maurizio Mencuccini (Chair), Dr Richard Ennos, Dr Kate Heal, Dr Gail Jackson, Dr Andy McLeod, Dr Mark Parrington, Prof Mathew Williams

Class Reps Present:

Francesco Benvenuti, Tie Caribe, Celine Delabre, Zak Gratton, Sarah Greenwood, Erin Grieve, Sian Jones, Catherine Kennedy, Eloise Littley, Manuel Loeffler, Emily Short, Robin Wild

In attendance:

Helen McKeating, Jamie Smith

1. Welcome

MM welcomed the Class Reps and the members of staff to the meeting of the SSL Committee.

2. Apologies

Sylvia Gitau (School Rep), Ron Wilson

Matters arising from previous Minutes

Minutes from the previous meetings had been circulated prior to the meeting. MM said that he was satisfied that all matters arising from the Minutes had been dealt with and said he would refer to them if the same problems arose again.

3. Earth Modelling and Prediction (EMP)

Eloise Littley

EL reported that students taking EMP were having difficulty keeping up with the course. The lectures were good, but the students felt they would benefit more if there was more interaction during them (questions and answers, etc). They felt it would also help if a smaller lecture theatre was used, as right now they are using a room with the capacity to hold 200 people and there are only 20 people in the class. Mark Parrington reported that the reason such a big room was requested was that the number of the students that would be on the course wasn't initially known.

The tutorials are considerably more difficult than what is covered in the lectures. Students feel that the basics are rushed while more complex items get more time. However, it can be difficult to grasp the basics without a grounding in Maths.

It was reported that students don't feel comfortable enough to ask questions and instead remain silent and confused.

MP said that as he had just taken over the course and was still learning himself he was trying to pace it out as best he could. MW suggested using clickers to give the students more capacity for interaction. MP could then get a better understanding of how students were following the lectures.

MM mentioned that in previous years, Open Hours sessions had been introduced. The students found this arrangement extremely useful and suggested to MP that he should think about re-introducing them for next year. MP will talk to Paul Palmer about this.

Action: MP

Many of the students are not familiar with Excel. MP said that he would try to simplify the language in the questions and it was generally felt that it would be worth having a skills session at the start of the course.

4. 3rd Year Ecological Science/Ecological Measurement/Natural Resource Management Celine Delabre, Zak Gratton, Erin Grieve

4.1 General comments

Some students were unhappy about the choice of courses in 2nd semester. Therefore students were taking four courses in 1st Semester which they found extremely hard going.

4.2 Ecological Measurement

Zak Gratton, Erin Grieve

Overall, students enjoyed this course. The Firbush field course went down well. The lectures reflect what was done at Firbush. The students felt that it would be better if everyone was sat in front of a computer, rather than the current system of everyone crowding round one. Many students were now bringing in their own laptops which had been approved by the CO.

The students would have liked the demonstrators to be available to answer questions and give them feedback on the 1st marked assignment before the 2nd assignment hand-in deadline. They would have then been able to see where they did and didn't do so well which would then have enabled them to do better in the 2nd assignment.

In lectures, students felt there was no time to take notes as there was so much focus on work and essays. If they're working on a PC or listening to a lecture, there is a particularly large amount to understand in one hour. A printed copy of PowerPoint presentations before classes would make a massive difference, as they could then just annotate and make adjustments to suit themselves rather than having to copy absolutely everything down.

Regarding Firbush projects, it was felt there was not enough one-to-one time. MM suggested that a timetable session might be a good idea.

It was suggested that it might be a better idea to use the computer lab in the Darwin Building, although there wouldn't be enough room for every single person to have a computer. MM said that if every student worked on a separate PC, it would make a big difference in terms of how the lecturer utilizes his time as he would then have to help everyone with every problem they encounter.

Some students are taking four subjects in 1st Semester which is causing a number of problems, i.e. constantly working on hand-ins and as a consequence of this no time to do anything else.

One good point is that the essays and assignments being done are actually reflecting what work is being done in lectures. Some students have difficulty with group work, depending on which group they're in and how committed/focused their team members are. It can be particularly hard to find time for meeting in groups as students are generally studying four subjects and have different deadlines to meet for each class they are in.

4.3 Natural Resource Management

Celine Delabre,

CD also reported that the students feel they have a lot of work this Semester with most students taking four courses. NRM has good quality lectures; Guest lecturers interesting, however the lack of background in Excel is again a problem. RW has tried to teach them pieces of Excel as they go along, advising them that he is teaching them Excel 'for real life, not the exam'. There is actually no assessment on Excel and the coursework isn't particularly related to Excel – however, Excel is obviously an important tool to use in order to do their work. Unfortunately, they feel that they are spending too much time on Excel rather than the coursework itself.

Students feel 'dumped' into the deep end of Excel usage in third year – immediately using functions such as 'if', dollar sign commands etc.

MM believes there might be more scope for an earlier introduction to Excel that would make the learning process for students more gradual. The students would appreciate this.

Also, more background on policies and regulations would be useful, but in general a good course and well organised.

5. 1st Year Ecological Science

Manuel Loeffler, Tie Caribe

TC reported that students would have liked more information regarding the location of accommodation in relation to where first year lectures are held before coming to Edinburgh. He said that when students register for a degree in GeoSciences they tended to think that their lectures would be held at KB since this is where GeoSciences is based. Therefore students tended to arrange their accommodation near to the KB campus. It's only after they arrive that they learn that most of the first year lectures are held in town. It was agreed that more information regarding accommodation could be published in the recruitment material.

ODL labs were good. Some students would like to see the Field Ecology course done earlier, perhaps in 1st year.

Some students were having problems identifying other Ecological Science students in their groups (as most people are studying on different timetables). MW suggested that they might want to think about getting EcoSoc Sweatshirts with the name of their class on the back so they could more easily identify each other.

6. 2nd Year Ecological Science/Principles of Ecology

Emily Short, Sarah Greenwood

SG reported that the students really enjoyed the Principles of Ecology lectures. However they did have a problem with Chris Ellis' lectures. They were quite tough and his slides lacked text. More text on these slides would have been useful. Although complicated they were enjoyable. GJ said that with CE being new to the course, she did sit in on most of his lectures.

Some students felt that there was not enough time to take notes in class. This would make a massive difference come exam time as they would have no notes to revise.

Most students really enjoyed Patrick Walsh's lectures and found his slides to be well laid out. Others found his lectures unclear and confusing and found themselves wondering what would be asked in the exam. GJ said she would email PW to ask him to set some mock exam questions.

Action: GJ

She also reported that she had sent out an email to the students to see if there was any interest in an overview of the exam to which she received no response.

Regarding the project, some students said they would have appreciated more time to do it. Although GJ said she had received no requests for more time. The students feel that an introduction at the start of the year before the statistics practical would be beneficial. GJ reported that she would be having a meeting with the course Team towards the end of the Semester to discuss how they felt the course had run this year.

Some students thought that SWAP was a compulsory course for students this year. However, MM pointed out that it was only compulsory for students entering 1st year 2011-2012 and not for existing students. Therefore it is not compulsory for 2nd year students 2011-2012.

7. **4th Year Ecological Science**

Catherine Kennedy, Sian Jones

The Class reps reported no real complaints about 4th year courses.

There was some concern regarding the Geoscience Outreach course. The students taking this course felt that they should have heard by now who they were partnered up with. MM said that he would contact the CO to find out what was happening.

Action: MM to contact Colin Graham

It was reported that some students are terrified about the synoptic exam and would like more information about what would be covered. RE said that the exam covers everything that students have learnt in Ecology. The main point is for students to demonstrate that they can access relevant information, put it together and reach a conclusion. However, students would appreciate having a very short session to explain what is required of them in the Synoptic Exam. MM said that this could be organised.

Action: MM

The students felt that the project titles and information on the Honours Dissertations were given to them far too late, especially if someone wanted to carry out a summer project. This information was normally given out to the students during the meeting with the third years towards the end of the 2nd semester. Students would appreciate this information as early as possible and it was agreed to hold a separate meeting early in the 2nd semester to discuss the Honours dissertations only.

Action: HMCK to call for project titles early January

The Class Reps reported that students would appreciate receiving announcements by email as well as via WebCT. They reported that some students were having problems receiving announcements on WebCT.

Students would also like to know more about what will be happening during the Innovative Learning Week (ILW).

Action: MM

Professional Skills

The Class Reps reported that attendance for Professional Skills had gone down. It appears that students don't turn up unless they feel the material covered will be useful. Could something more useful be done for the students who do turn up, e.g. teach R, practicals, computer work?

8. **AOCB**

FB mentioned the Edinburgh University Sustainability Award, which would be a great opportunity for students to volunteer and work with staff members to gain valuable experience.

There being no further business the Chair thanked the staff and students for attending and the meeting closed at 1.45 pm.