

Meeting 1/09

21 April 2009

For general publication

Present: Prof Ross Barnard, Miss Ashleigh Croucher (in the chair from Item 3), Mr Daniel De Voss, Mr Adrian English, Miss Elizabeth Garrard, Prof Mary Garson, Miss Katelin Haynes, Mr Vinay Kakamani Sundar Raju, Prof Alastair McEwan (in the chair until Item 2 inclusive), Mr Alexander Metcalf, Mr David Mogg, Assoc Prof Joe Rothnagel, Mr Mark Starkey (minutes), Ms Kavya Thelakkat, Dr Simon Worrall.

Apologies: Nil.

Welcome: Head of School, Alastair McEwan, welcomed members to the inaugural meeting of the Committee and thanked them for volunteering. The School wished to give students the best opportunities it could, and in doing so to hear from students about ways in which the School could improve. Prof McEwan spoke to the history of the School and how the disciplines had come together. Members then introduced themselves.

1. Terms of Reference and Membership Composition:

Members endorsed the terms of reference, mode of operation, and membership composition of the Committee, viewable on the School's public website.

In terms of the operation of the Committee, it was anticipated that discussions would be open and relatively informal.

2. Election of Chairperson:

Prof McEwan advised that the School would prefer that the Committee be chaired by a student member.

Following a call for nominations, foreshadowed in the agenda papers, Miss Ashleigh Croucher was the sole nominee and so was declared elected unopposed. Ashleigh took the chair from this point of the meeting onwards.

3. Assessment Practices:

Chair of the School's Teaching & Learning Committee, Joe Rothnagel, had proposed a discussion on the School's assessment practices, foreshadowed in the agenda papers.

Ashleigh mentioned that a number of BIOL1020 students had expressed concern about the amount of preparation they had been required to undertake for the recent mid-semester exam, which had been worth 18%. Adrian English added that he had felt that he had done a lot of study for 18%, but the breadth of that study meant that he had learnt more. He had found the exam relatively easy and felt better prepared for further assessment in the course. Elizabeth Garrard said that, looking back, the mid-semester exams done in first semester of first year were good preparation for students making the school-to-university transition.

Alastair McEwan pointed out that BIOL1020, like a number of other first year Science courses, was not fully controlled by the School of Chemistry & Molecular Biosciences, but taught by a team of staff from across more than one School. BIOL1020 was coordinated by a staff member from the School of Biological Sciences. In his view, the Faculty had a responsibility to oversee these courses.

Regarding the value of the test, at 18%, Ashleigh said she felt it was about right. Students were receiving marks for work they had done, but the value was not so high that those still adapting to the learning environment were penalised.

It was noted that the CHEM1030 mid-semester exam was worth 0% and that students might feel that they were doing work for 'no reward'. Katelin Haynes said that the non-compulsory exam was a wake-up call, as first year university chemistry is unlike high school. Students could find out how they were going without suffering a penalty.

Mary Garson added that such so-called formative assessment (no marks) also provided useful feedback to the teaching team in terms of possibly adjusting the delivery of the course content to better suit take-up by students.

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3. Assessment Practices: (cont'd)

Joe asked student members of the Committee of their views of the amount of continuous assessment set. A number of members responded that they were in favour of spreading assessment out across the semester. Kavya Thelakkat observed that in her program, postgraduate Biotechnology, a lot of assignments were due on the last day of semester, and she thought students would prefer it if they were more spaced across the semester. Third year representatives reported that the teaching-free week for third year Science was very useful for preparing for assessment that was due in following weeks.

Adrian English said that having a variety of types of assessment in a course kept it interesting. For example, CHEM1030 used CMTs, practical reports and exams. A member pointed out that the first year Chemistry course assessment regimes were better than first year Maths, where, in one course, there were 17 assignments and weekly deadlines with pieces of assessment worth only a few percent each.

Joe asked members to consider whether the weighting of assessment in courses was right and to consult with fellow students about this.

Vinay Kakamani Sundar Raju said a number of his fellow students in the MMolBiol program who were undertaking the Literature Review course (BIOC6014) had found it difficult to find an academic staff supervisor, a requirement of the course. Vinay said that emails to staff sent prior to the start of the academic year had gone unanswered. Simon Worrall, coordinator of the program, said that staff were sometimes pre-occupied with grant applications and course preparations at the start of first semester. He acknowledged that students attempting the course in their first semester tended to find it more difficult to locate a supervisor than those attempting the course later in the program who had gotten to know the staff. However, he encouraged students to do the course early in their program, in order to develop a relationship with an academic who might then become a project supervisor and to improve writing skills.

Ross Barnard noted that in the MBiotech program, students are advised to not do the course in their first semester.

Vinay suggested that more guidance to students on how to approach BIOC6014 would be useful.

4. Evaluation of Teaching by Students:

Members heard that the University uses a number of mechanisms to measure student satisfaction, including the national Course (program) Experience Questionnaire, the Australian Survey of Student Engagement and the UQ Student Experience Survey. These surveys measure program effectiveness as well as other aspects of the student experience.

At the course level, the major in-house evaluation tools are iCEVALS and TEVALs, with focus groups also used from time-to-time.

The iCEVAL instrument assesses the quality of a course. Each course is evaluated at least once every three years. Courses that undergo changes are typically evaluated more frequently. In SCMB, all courses since second semester 2008 are evaluated each time they are offered (with the exception of purely project courses).

Quantitative results are provided to the course coordinator, the Head of School and the Faculty's Associate Dean (Academic), after the exam period. They are also presented to the School's Teaching & Learning Committee (which includes a student representative). Qualitative results (written student comments) are provided to the course coordinator.

The T&L Committee looks for results that appear to be 'under par' (<3.5 on Question 20) and encourages course coordinators to review what worked and what did not, and to make changes accordingly. Traditionally, the course has then been renominated for evaluation at its next offering. The Course Profile now provides course coordinators with the opportunity to report to students what has changed since the last offering of the course and why.

Student
members

Simon
Worrall

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4. Evaluation of Teaching by Students: (cont'd)

Some staff are critical of the iCEVAL, saying that the sample sizes are sometimes small and self-selected. The qualitative results are seen to be more useful than the quantitative results by some. However, others feel that the results are useful at the 'broad brush' and trend level, and for new courses or those that had changed direction significantly, as an indicator of the effectiveness of the change.

TEVALs assess student perceptions of the quality of teaching in a range of different learning environments. In SCMB, TEVALs are undertaken by lecturing staff either as required (for confirmation of appointment, promotion, or at the request of a supervisor) or as desired (an individual staff member seeks feedback on his/her teaching). The results are presented in two formats – normative (permits comparison with similar disciplines, similar class sizes and course levels) and criterion-referenced (% agreement where 70% is the minimum standard to be achieved). Staff do not receive results until after the exam periods.

Recently the School reviewed its tutoring and one of the recommendations under consideration is to require tutors to complete a Tutor TEVAL and submit it to the course coordinator and to the School administration (to inform future hiring decisions and to identify outstanding tutors for reward).

Besides using the results to improve the learning experience of students, the School has a more fundamental reason for taking account of the evaluations – the number of enrolments significantly determines the funding a School needs to pay its staff.

Focus groups occur on an ad hoc basis and are more costly to organise and run than TEVAL and iCEVALs.

In second semester 2008, the Faculty of Science, in collaboration with UQ's Teaching & Educational Development Unit (TEDI), conducted focus groups of first year Science students to assess student perceptions of the first year of the new BSc curriculum. The findings, which became available only recently, include some data about individual first year courses which the School's Executive Committee and Teaching & Learning Committees are considering at their next meetings.

Student members of the Committee generally appreciated being asked to provide feedback and noted that some courses gave 1-2% of assessment for completing an evaluation, although it was felt if this was done, it should be consistent across courses. In courses where team teaching occurred, such as BIOL1020, students were asked to complete a TEVAL for every staff member and an iCEVAL for the course, which could become tedious. Some later-year students also reported 'evaluation fatigue'.

Members agreed that online evaluations attracted lower response rates than being asked to complete the evaluation in-class. Students would, however, appreciate lecturers programming the evaluation into the lecture schedule. Daniel De Voss suggested that some of the stock questions might be merged to allow more time/incentive for students to write comments.

Alastair McEwan mentioned that the University had been reviewing the evaluation tools and might merge the TEVAL and iCEVAL.

5. Identification of Career Paths for BSc Students:

The Head of School indicated that feedback he had received indicated to him that there was a perception that the Bachelor of Science degree did not lead to any particular careers. He was interested in working with students on the Committee to change this perception.

Ashleigh Croucher and Alex Metcalf rated the Undergraduate Science Students' Experience in Research (USSER) Network initiative highly for showing students the prospects of research. Katelin Haynes added that it would be good to have exposure to other career models. Ross Barnard noted that, in the Biotechnology program, there was a course in which those working in industry were brought in.

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5. Identification of Career Paths for BSc Students: (cont'd)

Adrian English thought that it was attractive that the BSc was not vocationally focussed and was flexible so that those students unsure of a particular career path could explore options. He added that facilitating the placement of students in vacation internships would be valuable.

Elizabeth Garrard said that, as a third year BSc student, she felt that more could be done to assist students in making the transition from study to work.

Vinay Sundar Raju said that he had attended a university where the formation of student companies was facilitated. This encouraged students to learn how to apply their skills in the real world.

Alastair McEwan pointed out that SCMB was participating in the Future Scientist Program of Kelly Scientific (the world's largest scientific staffing firm) to place students in vacation and part-time work experience, and had just formed an Industry Advisory Board, which may be able to contribute on the topics of career path identification and transition from study to work.

Mark
Starkey
for IAB

6. Development of a Stronger Cohort Experience for Students Taking BSc Majors:

The Head of School observed that, in the past, smaller university departments based on individual disciplines had been better able to achieve what he described as a vertically integrated learning community, meaning that there was a common thread from the first year undergraduate to the professor and a collegiate approach. The modern university school of multiple disciplines made the achievement of such a learning community more challenging.

Alastair observed that the change in the BSc curriculum to a majors structure was expected to help develop a cohort experience for students. Elizabeth Garrard added that having fewer courses now in second and third years meant that one was mixing with the same group of students more regularly. She said that students also tended to group together according to their ambitions, eg, proceeding to the MBBS, proceeding to research, enrolled in Biotechnology, etc.

Alastair said that he would like to see casual, self-directed learning spaces made available to later year undergraduates and honours students based on the majors. Student members of the committee agreed that this would be good. The Science Learning Centre in the Priestley Building had a first year student focus and was typically crowded.

Alastair
McEwan

7. Next Meeting:

It was agreed that the next meeting be held early in second semester, at a date to be advised by Mark Starkey.

Mark
Starkey

The Head of School suggested that discussion of items 5 and 6 above continue and that he and the chairperson might collaborate on preparing information for the consideration of members.

Alastair
McEwan

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