

COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT FOR THE NATURAL SCIENCES TRIPOS

Unconfirmed minutes of a meeting of the Committee of Management for the Natural Sciences Tripos held at **2.00pm** on **Tuesday 3rd March 2009** in Pathology Seminar Room, Tennis Court Road.

Present: Dr N Holmes (Chairman), Dr P Barrie, Professor T W Clyne, Dr S Dalziel, Dr P Dupree, Professor H Griffiths, Dr M Mason, Professor A Mycroft, Mr A Norman, Dr R Padman, Dr R Preece, Professor S Redfern, Dr S Russell, Professor J Secord, Professor D Ward, and Mrs E Oliver (Secretary).

Apologies: Professor R Horgan, Dr J Keeler, Miss S Zhang

469) **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 3rd February were approved, subject to the following amendment in paragraph 464) :

The discussion on the computational aspects of this proposal raised the question of whether an overview would be helpful of how practical computational science (a.k.a. scientific computing) fitted within the Natural Sciences. It was agreed that this was a strategic issue and should be for discussion at the next meeting of the Committee.

470) **MATTERS ARISING NOT ELSEWHERE ON THE AGENDA**

A summary sheet of action points and matters arising was circulated (**CM.533**). The Committee noted the contents. There were no additional matters arising.

471) **REPORTED AND STRAIGHTFORWARD**

A paper of reported business was circulated (**CM.534**).

- The Committee noted the amendment to the Form and Conduct Notice for Part II Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Major Subject – Psychology.
- A table was presented showing the number of places offered by Departments as part of the Part II Subject Allocation (**CM.535**). There were some minor changes but these were not thought to be significant; the Committee was reminded that the numbers represented places for candidates from both NST and MVST, and that the number of students accepted sometimes exceeded the number of places offered in some Departments. It was noted that the table needed to be read in conjunction with other Part II data.
- A summary of External Examiner reports (**CM.536**) was circulated. It was noted that comments were subject specific and that there were no cross-Tripos issues. A Physics External Examiner had suggested that a hurdle be introduced for some topics in order to reduce their uptake by students who were weak in mathematics. It was agreed that it was important that subjects requiring strong ability in mathematics should ensure that students were aware of these requirements.

472) **CLASSING IN PART IB**

At the October meeting a paper had been circulated and a discussion ensued as to whether the current norm referencing algorithm represented a disadvantage to certain students. An updated paper (**CM.537**), a letter from the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (**CM.538**) and comments from the previous Chair of IB Examiners (**CM.539**) were circulated. The Committee were asked to consider whether a review of the current procedures would be appropriate.

The paper had been prepared as a result of a long held perception that Part IB exams were not favourable to Physics students and a comparison of performance at Part IA and Part IB for the past two years was presented. There was some evidence that Mathematics and Physics candidates were disadvantaged in terms of the percentage

obtaining a 1/II.i. Applying scaling based on the mean mark of the IA cohort had changed the classes for approximately 30 students. A high percentage of those who moved up were Physics candidates whereas a mixture of other subjects moved down. Discussion on other aspects ensued, such as, the correlation between Part IA subjects, whether Biology students were disadvantaged in Part IA, whether students graduated towards the subjects in which they performed well, the effect of the decreased contribution of marks for mathematical subjects against bench subjects in Part IA, the additional effort required by some biology students in order to perform well in mathematics and its effect on their other subjects. The contribution from History & Philosophy of Science and the letter from David Buscher were explained in more detail.

There was agreement that it was important not to penalise students who moved out of their comfort zone as this would conflict with the ethos of the Natural Sciences Tripos. Some subjects were likely to need special consideration and any proposal for the future should bear this in mind. The student view was sought and it was felt that the 60% seemed rather arbitrary and that the availability of prior data when assessing Part IB may mean that a different method could be found. There was acknowledgement however that using data from previous years may include other factors. It was suggested that a more radical solution may be to class each subject in Part IB. Whether or not a target distribution would be required would need to be discussed.

The Committee concluded that more detailed work was required and agreed with the proposal to set up a working group. This should include five members from a range of subject areas. Volunteers were asked to contact the Chairman who would confirm the membership of the group.

473) **MATHS/COMPUTING IN PART IA**

At the February meeting the question of computing content within the NST was raised and was proposed for further discussion at this meeting. A paper of comments from Prof Horgan was circulated (**CM.540**) which referred to provision of computing within Part IA likely to be affected by the retirement of the member of staff currently responsible for that content.

The Committee was informed that since the original paper there had been an agreement that the computing content would be managed by Mathematics. It was suggested that scientific computing was a rapidly growing area and that its integration into NST would benefit from Management Committee oversight in order to gain a coherent view of the computing content required by NST. Discussion was needed on content, requirements, importance, timing, relevance to other subjects and levels, and method of assessment. It was important to have a long-term view and consider what currently existed in Departments and what was of common interest to Departments.

The Committee agreed that it would be appropriate to set up a working group. Volunteers were asked to contact the Chairman who would confirm the membership of the group.

474) **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

A paper was tabled (CM.541) which compared the exam entries for Part III Interdisciplinary papers in January 2009 with those of 2008. Earth Sciences had agreed to retain the management of the examination process for this year and arrangements to have the papers reviewed by External Examiners had now been agreed. Each paper would go to the External Examiner of the owning Department. Currently there was no defined ownership and it was agreed that Chemistry would

manage the Interdisciplinary papers but that the NST Management Committee would have ownership.

475) **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting shall take place at 2:00pm on Tuesday 5 May 2009 in Seminar Room B, 17 Mill Lane.