

## 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 2:00 pm on **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2011** in the Greaves Room, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Pathology, Tennis Court Road.

Present: Dr J Keeler (Chairman), Dr M Aitken, Dr S Fulton, Dr N Hopwood (representing Professor J Secord), Professor R Horgan, Professor A Mycroft, Mr J Norris, Dr R Padman, Professor S Redfern, Professor D Ritchie, Dr N Rutter, Dr C Schwiening, Dr T Tiffert, Mr T Towers and Mrs E Oliver (Secretary).

Apologies: Dr P Duffett-Smith, Professor H Griffiths, Dr S Russell, Dr Ian Wilson.

### **584) MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st February 2011 were agreed.

### **585) MATTERS ARISING NOT ELSEWHERE ON THE AGENDA**

A summary sheet of action points and matters arising (**CM.689**) was circulated. Attention was drawn to the action arising from Minute 581 regarding disclosure of examination data. The Education Section would be reviewing this topic on a University-wide basis. It was noted that the agreement for question-level data to be retained for a period during the summer by the current Part IA Chairman was specifically for this year and was not a binding commitment for future Chairman.

### **586) REPORTED AND STRAIGHTFORWARD BUSINESS**

A paper of reported business was circulated (**CM.690**).

- The Minutes of the meeting of the Biological Sciences Committee held on 20th January 2011 (**CM.691**) were noted.
- The Minutes of the meeting of the Physical Sciences Education Committee held on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 (**CM.692**) were noted. Item 4.2 dealt with IT support for Part IA and Part IB examinations. It was recognised that this was a vulnerable part of the process and that the matter would be further discussed at School level. Item 5.3 concerned the Interdisciplinary papers for Part III. It was felt that the information was already contained within the subject information for those Departments who participated and that an additional central source was unnecessary. It was agreed that a deadline of 1<sup>st</sup> July would be helpful for the exchange of synopses in digital form between participating departments.
- On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman had approved the amendment to regulations for the Preliminary Examinations for Part II made necessary by the withdrawal of IB Mineral Sciences with effect from 2011. The subjects affected were Geological Sciences and Materials Science. The change to regulations was published in the Reporter of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2011.
- In order to allow for variation in the examination requirements for subjects taken as part of Part II Biological and Biomedical Sciences, a change to regulations was proposed (**CM.693**). The Committee approved the change and noted that amendments to the presentation of information in the Faculty Board Notice would be made for the future so as to improve their clarity.  
**Action:** Secretary to forward regulation changes to the General Board's Education Committee and the Reporter.

- The Committee noted that the changes to regulations for the Ordinary BA Degree with effect from 1 October 2011 had now been approved by the Regent House. Course documentation, and marking and classing schemes would need to be updated (**CM.694**). Changes had been made to the NST website and Faculty Boards had been contacted with regards to individual subjects.
- A list of candidates to whom allowances had been made by Council in respect of examinations held in the Easter Term 2010 was circulated (**CM.695**) and noted.
- The Preliminary Reading List for new students (**CM.696**) had recently been updated in consultation with Course Organisers. The Committee approved the updated list.  
**Action:** Secretary to arrange for publication on the NST website and circulate to Colleges.
- At its November 2010 meeting the Committee had noted that some Part II and Part III subjects had responses below the University average, over 3 years, to Question 5 of the NSS survey; *“the criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance”*. Attention had been drawn to the result and relevant Course Organisers had been asked if there were plans to address this topic. A summary of responses was circulated (**CM.697**). The Committee noted that all Course Organisers contacted had confirmed that the information was available, that students were directed to it and that Course Organisers/Departments made significant efforts to ensure that this information was clear and available in advance. A comment from HPS summed up the situation particularly well with an explanation that there was a difference in perception on the part of the Department and the students of what was appropriate. The Chairman thanked the Course Organisers for their admirable responses and the Committee agreed that there was no cause for concern.  
**Action:** Secretary to report the outcome to the Education Section.
- The General Board Education Committee, in its response to the Management Committee’s Annual Report, had noted that a number of students had not been successful in obtaining either their first or second choice of Part II biological subject and had asked the Management Committee to keep the matter under review. The Committee confirmed that review of this topic was regular and ongoing.
- The following dates were agreed for meetings of the Committee during 2011-12 (all meetings on Tuesdays at 2.00 pm - venue to be announced):

Michaelmas	Lent	Easter
11 <sup>th</sup> October 2011	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2012	1 <sup>st</sup> May 2012
22 <sup>nd</sup> November 2011	28 <sup>th</sup> February 2012	26 <sup>th</sup> June 2012

It was agreed to defer the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting in the Easter Term 2011 from 28<sup>th</sup> June to 5<sup>th</sup> July.

### 587) REPORT FROM CARET

A report from CARET on modelling carried out on the IA timetable was circulated (**CM.698**). Following a proposal that the restriction for all Computer Scientists to take Physical practicals on Fridays could be relaxed, CARET had carried out modelling and the outcome had shown that a better fit of numbers in Physics lab sessions was achieved. This change in constraints was acceptable to Computer Science and could be used for the 2011 process. Other possible changes, which could be explored by running simulations, were suggested in the report and were discussed. It was agreed to pursue the option of Materials Science

moving to 4 instances weekly with a start time of 2 pm. This change would be needed for 2013 following relocation of the Department to the West Cambridge site, but could be put in place earlier, in 2012 or possibly in 2011. The suggestion of changes to the times of Chemistry practicals (restricting them to 2 – 5 every afternoon) was also thought to be worth modelling, but was of a lower priority than the Materials Science change.

It was suggested that Departments located on the West Cambridge site may wish to consider sessions that started on the half hour to allow for travel.

Suggestions for more fundamental changes to the timetable proposed in the report were not thought worth simulating at this stage.

**Action:** Secretary to relay the Committee's responses to CARET.

#### **588) DISABILITY NOTIFICATION TO DEPARTMENTS AND SPECIAL CASE FOR EXAMS**

A note suggesting a proposed mechanism for informing Departments about NST students with special needs was circulated (**CM.699**). The Disability Resource Centre (DRC) prepares Support Documents to help share relevant information related to a disabled student's disability and appropriate and recommended support. Normally this information would be passed to Colleges and to the relevant Department, but for NST there was no clear mechanism for getting the information to the relevant course organisers, and then onward to lecturers. It had been suggested that the Secretary could disseminate this information via Course Organisers. It was noted that information for some students with special needs did not arrive until quite late in the year. New mechanisms were already in place to address this by contacting applicants at an earlier stage, but nevertheless some did not declare any disability until their arrival. It was noted that this process would not interfere with the examination arrangements which would continue to be dealt with by the Board of Examinations. The Committee approved the process.

**Action:** Secretary to commence dissemination of Support Documents.

The Committee noted that the Deputy Academic Secretary has recently agreed that a student should, exceptionally, be allowed to take Part II over two years. This decision was taken after consideration of the University's obligation within the relevant disability legislation and the Department concerned had been informed. It was thought that this was not the first occurrence of a student taking Part II over two years within NST.

#### **589) GUIDE TO COURSES**

The Committee noted that the *Guide to Courses*, which used to be a paper publication and is currently available on line from the University website, is not likely to be updated this year and is likely to be discontinued. The *Guide* appeared to be used by students, Directors of Studies and from outside, to varying degrees but took considerable effort to gather the content and to some extent duplicated information in the prospectus. The Committee was asked whether it wished to continue to make the content of the *Guide* available for NST subjects. After discussion it was agreed that the complexity of the Natural Sciences meant that having one source document was useful and that as the document was currently in existence it should be maintained and exist as a pdf document on the NST website. Currently the content was collected at the same time as the programme specification and this would likely continue.

**Action:** Secretary to arrange for the document to be updated and housed on the NST website.

#### **590) LECTURE LIST**

The Committee noted that the Lecture List was likely to be available in electronic form only from October 2011 and methods of presenting timetable information were under discussion. CARET had proposed to pilot a Timetabling Publishing Tool using NST data for the forthcoming academic year. A paper was tabled (**CM.704**) which explained the process and

provided screen shots of the proposed timetable view. The data entered would also permit a view similar to the current Lecture List if that was what was required. The pilot would be funded by the CourseTools project which would provide help for entry of data in the first instance. It was felt that a collective timetable in one location was necessary for Part IA and Part IB, but that Part II and Part III subjects could be located separately. The existing timetabling information as part of the NST Parts IA and IB induction pages should remain. Dr Schwiening explained that he had recently introduced an online timetable for PDN and was willing to provide advice to CARET based on his own experience; this was welcomed. The Committee noted that, in designing the system, CARET should be careful to make it possible to import data from files, so as to avoid laborious keying of data. The system should also export data in common formats, for example those used by electronic diaries. The Committee were happy for the proposed timetable to be piloted using NST data and noted that they would like to see a demonstration in due course.

**Action:** Secretary to report the Committee's views to CARET

### **591) PART IA PRACTICAL ALLOCATIONS – ADVANCING THE DEADLINE**

Senior Tutors and Directors of Studies had been contacted regarding the possibility of bringing forward the deadline for entering Part IA subject choices from midday on the Tuesday to midnight on the Monday before the start of Michaelmas Term. Responses had been summarised and circulated (**CM.700**). Several responses had been supportive but some Colleges felt that this would be unworkable given their current processes. A suggestion from the Senior Tutors' Standing Committee on Education to delay the issue of timetables to students was not thought to be practicable. After discussion it was agreed that, without a strong consensus for change, the present timetable would have to remain. It was hoped that other changes to the process could be put in place which would improve the operability of the system. These might include: reducing some timetabling constraints; making the system available earlier for those Colleges who wished to enter data early; providing a mechanism to facilitate later changes.

### **592) TRANSITIONAL AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS**

#### **Scoping project for physical sciences**

A paper was circulated which explained the next phase in the Transkills project which would look at discipline-specific resources with a focus on the physical sciences (**CM.701**). The content was noted and interested parties were asked to contact the project's Skills Training Officer who could also contact Departments directly.

**Action:** Secretary to notify the SkillsTraining Officer.

#### **Faculty and department statements**

An email from the Education Section asking Faculties and Departments to review their Transferable Skills statements was circulated (**CM.702**) together with the NST web page on Transferable Skills (**CM.703**). It was felt that the NST content should remain generic but that links to existing information could be improved. Departments would also be contacted by the Education Section and asked to update or improve their current discipline-specific pages.

**Action:** Secretary to update NST webpage prior to Departments being contacted.

### **593) ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Dr Schwiening asked whether members of the Committee were interested in being involved in considering provision of electronic lecture notes to replace paper handouts. His initial evaluation had shown that costs for producing lecture notes on paper were high and rising, and that an alternative electronic method of providing the notes might be a way forward for the

future. It was clear that interest may be subject-specific or even lecturer-specific and any alternative method would need to cater for different styles of lecture. Dr Schwiening noted that the relevant technology was developing quickly and it may be appropriate to assess possibilities now by a trial on a small course so as to be able to act in the future. After some discussion of the options and practicalities of this approach, the Committee encouraged Dr Schwiening to continue exploring the possibilities in this area.

**Action:** Dr Schwiening agreed to circulate members of the Committee to assess interest with a view to a usability test in 2011.

Dr Padman reported that further discussions would be taking place with the Faculty of Mathematics with regards to criteria for awarding pass and distinction marks for M.A.St candidates in Mathematics and Natural Science subjects.

#### **594) DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting will take place at **2:00 pm** on Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2011 in Seminar Room C, 17 Mill Lane.