

UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN
TRINITY COLLEGE

Undergraduate Studies Committee

A meeting of Undergraduate Studies Committee was held on 31st January 2012 at 2.15pm in the Board Room.

Present: Senior Lecturer, Dr Patrick Geoghegan (*Chair*)
Academic Secretary, Ms Patricia Callaghan
Directors of Teaching and Learning (Undergraduate)
Dr Peter Cherry, School of Histories and Humanities
Dr Rachel Hoare, School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies
Dr Pauline Sloane, School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences
Dr Benjamin Wold, Aspirant School of Religions, Theology and Ecumenics
Dr Paul O'Grady, School of Social Sciences and Philosophy
Ms Gloria Kirwan, School of Social Work and Social Policy
Dr Jim Quinn, School of Business
Dr Michael Shevlin, School of Education
Dr Oran Doyle, School of Law
Professor Richard Timoney, School of Mathematics
Dr Wolfgang Schmitt, School of Chemistry
Dr Clair Gardiner, School of Biochemistry and Immunology
Professor Dan Bradley, School of Genetics and Microbiology
Dr Jacinta McLoughlin, School of Dental Science
Dr Catherine McCabe, School of Nursing and Midwifery
Dr Anne Marie Healy, School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences
Professor Moray McGowan, Director of TSM
Dr Francis O'Toole, Director of BESS
Professor Graeme Watson, Director of Science (TR071)
Ms Rachel Barry, Education Officer, Students' Union

Apologies: Dean of Students, Dr Amanda Piesse
Dr Evangelia Rigaki, School of Drama, Film and Music
Dr Philip Coleman, School of English
Dr Michael Gormley, School of Psychology
Dr Dermot O'Dwyer, School of Engineering
Dr Andrew Butterfield, School of Computer Science and Statistics
Dr David Chew, School of Natural Sciences
Dr Stefan Hutzler, School of Physics
Dr Martina Hennessy, School of Medicine
Mr Daniel Ferrick, Student Representative

In attendance: Ms Sorcha De Brunner, Mr Trevor Peare (Library Representative), Registrar, Senior Tutor, Mr Bruce Misstear, Mrs Mary Sharp, Dr Desmond Ryan, Dr Paul Spiers and Graduate Students' Union Vice-President (for UGS/11-12/035)

UGS/11-12/033 Minutes

The minutes of the 13th December 2011 were approved.

UGS/11-12/034 Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

UGS/11-12/035 Academic Appeals

A memorandum from the Senior Lecturer, 'Academic Appeals', dated 24th January 2012 was circulated. The Senior Lecturer welcomed the members of the Academic Appeals Committee to the meeting.

Speaking to his memorandum, he commented on the significant increase in cases brought to the Academic Appeals Committee following the supplemental examination session in 2011; 28 compared to 14 arising from the same period in 2010. He emphasised that pressure needs to be eased at this time of year between the marking of scripts, publication of results, court of first appeal cases and the Academic Appeals Committee. He also commented that greater consistency is required in relation to the decisions reached by courts of first appeal and noted the rise in the appeal cases that contained financial considerations, especially where the appeal centred on permitting a student to go off-books. He clarified the interpretation of the regulation 'Medical certificates will not be accepted in explanation for poor performance' (Calendar Part One, H8 §33) by advising that the presence of a medical certificate could not be used as a reason to alter a failing grade to a pass grade but it could be considered to determine the appropriate course of action for a student who has failed particular assessments.

The Senior Tutor highlighted the fact that it is not always in the best interest of students to allow them to go off-books, however, such decisions must take into account the reality that many students cannot afford to repeat the year on-books and would consequently drop-out. She highlighted the time pressures faced by all those involved in bringing appeals through to the Academic Appeals Committee, especially tutors, which can result in a lack of information being presented to the Committee or in cases being brought directly to the Academic Appeals Committee, without being considered by the relevant court of first appeal. Commenting on special examinations she noted that these could not be held any later in the year and she did not favour holding meetings of the Academic Appeals Committee later as students must be informed earlier, rather than later, that they are permitted to sit special examinations. She concluded by noting that the new student administration system and the harmonised regulations should help to provide good quality information and to streamline processes.

The Registrar noted that she and the Senior Lecturer had already discussed the need to clearly document the procedures related to appeals cases, and to define members' roles and responsibilities.

The main issues raised during the discussion were:

Repetition of the year

There was some support for allowing students to repeat a subset of modules on-books, with a pro-rata reduction in course fees, if this could be facilitated. It was suggested by some that students could perhaps carry failed marks into the next year instead of being allowed to take special examinations, however, it was acknowledged that this could not occur in all courses.

Special Examinations

There was dissatisfaction expressed in relation to the timing of the special examinations. Lectures and laboratory sessions are missed, since they take place in the third week of the Michaelmas teaching term. Concern was expressed in relation to the increasing numbers of students permitted to sit these examinations. Previously they were reserved for exceptional cases, however, there is an increasing perception that all students are entitled to sit special examinations as an extension of the supplemental session. The availability of insurance for students due to take special examinations, or those waiting to receive results, was queried since they are not registered during this time.

Medical Evidence

In many cases, Schools are not aware of medical issues affecting a student until a medical certificate is produced as evidence at a court of first appeal. It was noted that comments provided by doctors can be quite loose. Despite this, members of appeal courts do not feel qualified to dispute the medical evidence; anecdotally it appears that some students may abuse this mechanism. There is an expectation,

where there is a medical certificate produced, that the Academic Appeals Committee will generally find in the student's favour. The Senior Tutor commented that medical certificates should be submitted by students within three days of missed examinations, however, in cases of mental illness the condition may not be recognised by the student at the time. Despite this, she advised that should Trinity re-affirm this regulation.

Consistency in decisions

A number of suggestions were made to facilitate greater consistency in decisions of the various courts of first appeal across College. It was suggested that the courts could be organised on a faculty basis, however, this was considered unwieldy. For example, the Science (TR071) appeal court already covers approximately 2,000 students who could potentially lodge an appeal. It was commented that appeal court members could join other courts of first appeal to gain a greater understanding of decisions being made elsewhere; it was confirmed that this practice is already in place in areas in the Faculty of Health Sciences. It would help if there were clearer guidelines on the normal range of outcomes for cases, whilst bearing in mind that many cases have unique elements.

Academic year structure and scheduling

It would not be fair on students to move the Academic Appeals Committee dates nearer the start of the special examinations. It was noted that other institutions start their repeat examinations in mid-August. Since the processes related to the correction of scripts, publication of results and appeals are already as tight as they can be, consideration could be given to starting the academic year earlier.

Grounds for appealing

In discussing some of the spurious cases which are brought to appeal it was commented that tutors should not act as 'judge and jury' by dissuading students to make their case. It was suggested that the inclusion of an 'extenuating circumstances' procedure, into the courts of examiners stage, would help to reduce the number of appeals cases. It was also suggested that cases being brought to the Academic Appeals Committee should have to satisfy different criteria, for example, the production of additional evidence.

The USC agreed that:

1. The Senior Lecturer and the Registrar should liaise with the Chairs of the various courts of first appeal with a view to developing general guidelines. It was acknowledged that there should be different guidelines for professional and non-professional courses.
2. The topic of the Academic Year Structure should be returned to at a future USC meeting and should include consideration of the continued use of the third revision week before the annual examinations and the possibility of starting the statutory Michaelmas term earlier.
3. Consideration should be given to refining the rules governing how cases can be appealed to the Academic Appeals Committee.

The Senior Lecturer thanked the members of the Academic Appeals Committee for attending the meeting.

UGS/11-12/036 Senior Lecturer's Annual Report

The 'Draft Senior Lecturer's Annual Report 2010/11' dated January 2012, was circulated. The Senior Lecturer advised that the report is due to be considered by Council on the 15th February 2012. Speaking to the report, he drew the attention of the meeting to the new introductory section which includes an overview of key information provided in the report and a summary of the work of the USC in 2010/11.

Before discussing information about the geographical spread, within Ireland, of new entrants to the College he commented that the information in the published lists of

feeder schools suggests that the other Irish universities have specific geographic catchment areas giving them a regional focus; however, TCD seems to be more of a national university attracting entrants more broadly from across the entire island. However, he noted that there has been a decline in the number of students from Northern Ireland over the past number of years.

He highlighted the following:

- The majority of new entrants continue to choose the reputation of the course as being the most important factor in choosing Trinity, emphasising the importance of undergraduate teaching and learning.
- New entrants highlighted that course specific Open Days would be useful, something that had been recommended in the report on retention.
- The increase in the number of student cases, with a rise of 38% since 2007/08.
- A change of language in how students taking Broad Curriculum modules were described. He noted the number of students who completed a Broad Curriculum module in 2010/11, but emphasised that the original Broad Curriculum policy was about developing the nine attributes of the Trinity graduate in all students, not just those taking a BC module. The perception of this initiative is now generally about taking a module from outside a student's home discipline.

Responding to a query, the USC Secretary clarified data related to students classified as non-EU for fees purposes.

The Students' Union Education Officer commented that a case management strategy should be put in place to help cope with the rise in student cases.

It was suggested that future reports could include data on the number of students gaining access to College on abridged entry.

The Senior Lecturer paid tribute to those who helped to produce the report.

UGS/11-12/037 Working Group on Admissions and Curriculum

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A document, 'Discussion Paper from the Working Group on Admissions and the Curriculum', dated 25th January 2012, was circulated. The Senior Lecturer speaking to the item noted that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) had produced a joint document for the Minister for Education and Skills, following the national conference 'Transition or Transaction', which took place in September 2011. The document, 'From Transaction to Transition: Outcomes of the Conference on the Transition from Second to Third-Level Education in Ireland' includes some radical recommendations concerning the admission of students, the first year curriculum and the possibility of graduate entry to certain professional courses. He noted with particular concern the recommendation to alter the choice of undergraduate courses available in third-level institutions to develop a smaller number of more general entry courses. He commented that such a development would have the effect of transferring the 'points race' to third-level education and could open the door for a lottery system admission process in the future.

The Senior Lecturer suggested that College had four options: it could support these changes, oppose them, ignore them, or conduct its own review of these areas and develop alternative approaches and recommendations. The Working Group had thus prepared a discussion paper for Council on some of these issues, looking at high level criteria for admissions, some key principles that might underpin any admissions policy, a restatement of the strengths of the Trinity curriculum and a rejection of some of the proposals in the HEA/NCCA document. It did not attempt to define how these might look in practice, and that these were issues that could be investigated by the College community once some high-level criteria and principles were agreed. He noted that this was an opportunity for TCD to show leadership in this area, and suggested that a proposed one-day conference in May 2012 to be held in the Trinity Long Room Hub was one way of doing this.

During the discussion of the item the following comments were made:

- The NCCA/HEA document does not recognise the differences between third-level institutions.
- Decisions in relation to admissions and diversity should be consistent with the global relations strategy.
- College should look at the practices in the top universities on an international stage because, given Trinity's brand, it can compete on a global scale better than other universities in Ireland.
- Interviews in UK universities are used as another method of testing for academic achievement.
- The interview process in Oxford is very labour intensive and it was queried if these would be feasible given the number of places on certain courses in Trinity and Ireland's small population.
- Selecting candidates should not merely be about their ability to complete the course, it should be about matching student to appropriate courses and choosing those that will excel.
- Academic criteria should be given primacy in the selection of candidates, any other criteria should be supplementary.
- There is no mention of excellence in the discussion paper.
- Setting potential as an additional criterion could mean instituting another code which is more decipherable by those from middle class backgrounds; at least the Leaving Certificate is uniform across all secondary schools;
- There must be a concrete definition of 'potential'
- The document does not highlight the quality of current students and graduates.
- Postgraduate entry for certain professional courses would be contrary to particular EU Directives and would not actually benefit the professions concerned.
- Diversity is already accounted for by setting quotas for underrepresented groups, however, it was commented the definition of diversity should not be limited to social class or disadvantage.
- There needs to be a better method to match students to courses, in this regard it was suggested that leaving certificate subjects, relevant to the course applied for, might be given a higher weighting in terms of points and consideration given to which subjects should be counted for entry.

There was considerable discussion about the possible meaning of potential and how this is measured. Some stressed that potential must relate to showing ability to excel academically. The Senior Lecturer suggested that TCD was limited in its ability to identify and admit students with a passion for a subject because of the rigidity of the current CAO system, and it was agreed that some way of matching students to the right course for them would be beneficial on a number of levels. He commented that he hoped that the issues raised in the discussion paper would help to generate a wider debate.

In summing up the Senior Lecturer noted the meeting's support for the proposal to host a national conference on topic of admissions and curriculum, the rejection of the idea to restructure TCD's undergraduate portfolio (as proposed in the NCCA/HEA document), and the support for the seven principles which should underlie the admissions process. It was agreed that the greatest challenge lay in defining the high-level criteria and ensuring that whatever criteria were agreed reflected TCD's ambition to further become Ireland's university on the world stage.

UGS/11-12/038 Open Day 2012

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A memorandum from the Senior Lecturer, 'Open Day 2011', dated 23rd January 2012, was circulated. Introducing the item, the Senior Lecturer commented that in light of feedback collated by the Admissions Liaison Officer from across College, the discussion of Open Day at USC on 13th December 2011, and the problems caused by cancelling teaching, it is proposed that Open Day in 2012 should be a single day event, to be held on a Saturday. He advised that the Admissions Liaison Officer is

developing an undergraduate recruitment strategy and that the organisation of Open Day will be reviewed, in January 2013, in light of the strategy document and the experiences of the event in 2012. He also proposed that there should be more events organised to complement Open Day, such as course specific events, which would be consistent with the Council approved policy on retention.

It was suggested that if Council approves the recommendation to hold Open Day as a Saturday only event, consideration should be given to extending the hours into late afternoon, as there were many latecomers on Saturday 3rd December 2011.

The USC recommended that Open Day, in 2012, be organised as a one-day event to be held on a Saturday.

UGS/11-12/039 Course year nomenclature

XX A memorandum from the Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer, 'Course Year Nomenclature for Taught Courses', dated 25th January 2012, was circulated.

Following a brief discussion about standardising course year nomenclature across College, USC recommended the following to Council:

Undergraduate Degree

1. Use Junior Freshman, Senior Freshman, Junior Sophister, and Senior Sophister for all 4 year degrees (Level 8)
2. Use Junior Freshman, Senior Freshman, and Junior Sophister for the Bachelor in Dental Technology (Level 7)
3. Use Year 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 for courses of 5 years duration
4. Use Year 1, 2, 3 for the Acting Course which is level 8 but 3 years in duration.

Undergraduate Diploma (Levels 7 and special awards)

1. Use Year 1, and 2

UGS/11-12/040 Any other business

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- a) The Senior Lecturer drew the attention of the meeting to the memorandum, circulated for information, concerning the requirement for Schools and Disciplines to retain examinations scripts and other assessments for thirteen months from the date of the court of examiners at which the marks in question were moderated. It was confirmed that this rule also applies to Foundation Scholarship scripts.
 - b) He noted that the second item, due to be circulated for information, concerning the creation of a new stream in the Engineering course, would come to a later USC meeting as a Section A item.

UGS/11-12/041 Items for noting

USC noted, and approved where necessary, the following documents circulated for information:

1. Memorandum from the Senior Lecturer, 'Retention of Examination Scripts', dated 26th January 2012.
2. Memorandum from the Senior Lecturer, 'Revisions to Gold Medal Criteria' dated 26th January 2012.

signature

date