

Report to ICU Council
Jonathan Silver, Deputy President (Education)

Staff-student meetings

In my report last month, I explained that I was compiling a report on undergraduate staff-student meetings: what's worked, what hasn't worked, and how they could be made to work better. Here's a snippet of the general points I extracted:

- *Academic staff, in general, appreciate the importance and usefulness of these meetings.*
- *Students are generally complimentary about teaching where they feel it is appropriate.*
- ***External examiner reports were not mentioned in any staff-student committee meeting at any point this term!***
- ***Annual Monitoring Reports were not mentioned in any staff-student committee meeting at any point this term!***
- ***The roles and performance of personal tutors has barely been discussed this term, despite its presence as a standing agenda item even on the template agenda in the rep handbook***
- *Very few departments use SSC meetings to feed back outcomes of College or external surveys.*
- *However, departments seem keen to launch internal surveys based on issues raised by reps, which shows a welcome trend towards student-centric teaching practice.*
- *As predicted, assessment feedback is an area of concern across College and most departments are aware and are making an effort to improve the situation.*
- *There are 11 independent mentions of timetabling problems, particularly clashes and an unclear format. Some departments seem to want to improve this but this may be unlikely to improve until electronic timetabling is centralised at College.*
- *When an issue with a member of teaching staff has been raised in an SSC meeting (i.e. above the level of the staff), It is questionable whether it is still the role of the reps to approach the staff concerned. Frequently senior staff direct the reps back to the member of staff to achieve a resolution rather than dealing with the issue themselves. Discuss?*
- *Where I have had access to the minutes of two meetings in the same term, the continuity has resulted in fast, positive outcomes for many issues, which is pleasing. Such a high frequency of meetings may not be appropriate in every department.*
- *Some departments seem particularly dismissive of Humanities options and are unwilling for their students to learn languages, which is particularly concerning given that departments will be expected to fund for-credit Humanities options and many expect a high quality of communication when students spend a year abroad.*
- *A direct report from the DTC given in these meetings, where it has happened, prompts discussion on many areas of concern and should be considered extremely good practice.*
- *Only some departments seem aware of TOLE (Tutorial Online Evaluation), and out of all the meetings involving taught postgraduate reps, none included a mention of MOLE (Masters Online Evaluation). This may indicate that staff have not been briefed well enough or in enough time to publicise the surveys effectively. The low response rate to the first MOLE reflects this.*

I'm delighted to report that, when I presented this to the Quality Assurance Advisory Committee, the Pro Rector (Education) made an instant decision to review the 'good practice guidelines' for how these meetings should be run, based on the instances of good and poor practice highlighted in the points above and in the body of my report. If you're interested in reading the report to find out how good your department is, then I can email it to you; if you're more interested in watching paint dry, then B&Q might be your answer.

Tightening up representation

This has come on somewhat since my last Council report. I now have a full representative structure written down for undergraduates—with no change from the current structure, but now it's written down, official and you can't argue with it—and a postgraduate structure is coming together at a rate of knots, now I've spent hours studying programme data from Registry's database, been in consultation with the Directors of Postgraduate Studies in departments and had lots of help from the inimitable Phil Power. The PG Medicine Rep has also been fantastic in general and her help in explaining things that confuse me is much appreciated (the PG Life Sciences and Medicine structure is utterly baffling)! Currently there is no proper postgraduate representation structure beyond faculty level, and even there it's a bit like swiss cheese at the moment. When I've finished I hope there'll be a much more solid basis to hand over to the GSA, with a documented representative position for every MSc/MBA cohort, and officers devoted to representing research students across College, with appropriate fields in the database for each, mailing lists, procedures for elections, clear reporting lines, enough redundancy to allow for the busy and precarious lives of postgraduate students, and the means for the GSA and the DPE to monitor the whole shebang like a hawk to check that it's all still there and working constantly.

Non-teaching department surveys

Both ICT and the Library Service have published the results of their recent surveys of students, which are both largely positive. The following points were memorable:

- Libraries:
 - Students are delighted about the Central Library's opening hours. A review of the opening hours of some of the medical campus libraries and the Mathematics Library is needed.
 - More PCs are needed in the libraries.
 - There is sometimes too much noise in some parts of the Central Library. (*They're not sure about the best way to tackle this, so please send me feedback and ideas.*)
 - The Central Library is too hot, but we knew that.
 - Some people want more copies of some text books.
- ICT:
 - Students want more PCs, particularly in the libraries. (Good to see it agrees with the Libraries survey.)
 - There aren't enough working printers in the libraries. (Interestingly, this came up in the ICT survey but not the Libraries survey.)
 - Wireless coverage isn't widespread enough, particularly in halls.
 - No-one buys laptops for personal use through ICT any more.

Both departments are a keen, engaged bunch and have promised to address all the points above as soon as possible, funds permitting, and will report their changes back through the Felix Editor and through the sabbs. I have faith in them.

Biomedical Science

I was in a team of five people who spent a day last month reviewing the Biomedical Science degree at the grand old age of three years. Our findings are largely positive, with a small number of recommendations to address a few issues in an otherwise well-run degree that achieves its objective of bridging the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Natural Sciences, creating an environment rich in expertise and resources, ready to train biomedical researchers to a high standard. The draft report is currently being checked by an external reviewer, and then I shall be able to show it to anyone who would like to see it.

Departmental Student System

As you may remember, the Dean of Students and Dean of Learning and Teaching are working hard to improve the student experience, and particularly the effectiveness of personal tutors. It was clear that

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personal tutors needed some way of monitoring their tutees' progress over the year, and that students desperately need some way to get assessment marks back without having to wait until July to find out that they've failed a piece of coursework they handed in in December.

In June, departments look under tables and behind cushions for the marks that students have achieved in exams and coursework, and write them on papyrus with a quill, and send them to Registry with a pigeon. (Mech Eng still use slate and chalk). This is all set to change.

ICT have set to work on building an online system to store marks, giving students and staff the chance to keep an eye on attainment, much like the existing students in departments such as Computing and ESE. It is envisaged that this could, in future, be used to allow online coursework submission and online module choices and whatever else anyone can think of, but for now, they can't do anything until there's a system that knows all about faculties, departments, programmes and modules, separate from the rusty, confusing database used by Registry (which doesn't even know what modules we take until our department submits them in June on an Excel spreadsheet).

ICT are building this as we speak, and I'm on the project board that meets every week to give input on the functionality and look-and-feel. It is exciting and will be ready by October. I'll keep you updated.

There is an interesting story around the name of the system, though. It was initially called Departmental Student System as a working title. The project board was asked for suggestions for a permanent name, and in the ensuing email conversation, a certain academic tutor close to my heart made the following suggestions as a joke:

Teaching And Related Departmental Information System (holds more information than there is hard disc)

Departmental Repository for Information on Programmes (can I get a DRIP-feed?)

Courses And Programmes - OnLinE Information Retrieval and Access

Unexpectedly for him, the Dean of Learning and Teaching liked the idea:

I really like tardis. If someone actively dislikes tardis would they please veto it.

In a final twist to the conversation, a young Biology academic, very popular with his students, emailed round a picture of himself aged about 6 standing in front of a replica TARDIS:

I could live with TARDIS, but I am a saddo with a wasted childhood; see attached.

The name is still not confirmed: we have to check with Communications first, in case we're going to get sued for using it. But it's looking likely that the College-wide system we are going to be using from October will be called TARDIS.

Leave

I used a few days of leave to visit South Africa with Imperial College Symphony Orchestra, where we played some music, caught some sun and nearly got charged by rhinos. I thoroughly recommend a winter holiday to somewhere sunny to give you a boost to get through the remaining cold dark months.