

Royal College of Science Union

Minutes of the 2nd meeting of the Academic Affairs Committee

Held at 12:00 on 12th October 2016 at the RCSU Office (Sherfield 214D)

PRESENT:

- **Lloyd James – RCSU President (LJ)**
- **Michael Edwards – RCSU Honorary Secretary (ME)**
- **Sinziana Giju – RCSU Academic Affairs Officer (SG)**
- **Raven Connelly – Biology Departmental Representative (RC)**
- **Maximillian Moser – Chemistry Departmental Representative (MM)**
- **Emma McCracken – Maths Departmental Representative (EM)**
- **Abhijay Sood – Physics Departmental Representative (AS)**

APOLOGIES:

ABSENT:

Biochemistry Departmental Representative () - *issues raised with selection process, but will be invited to future meetings as the legitimate representative of Biochemistry students.*

OBSERVERS:

- **Luke McCrone - ICU Deputy President (Education)**

Meeting opened at 12:00.

A. Departmental Representative Reports

RECEIVED: These were delivered by the DepReps individually.

NOTED:

1. **Physics (AS)** - the bad NSS results for the Physics Department were noted by the Board, with some reasons suggested. The gap between students' expectation for change and the actual change made was suggested. Considering the performance of the Rep Team for the department over the last few years, these results don't reflect the efforts made by students. Last year's BSc students were raised as a source of discontent with some unsuccessful changes in the 2012 session affecting the result of this cycle's NSS.
 - o SG raised whether this was an issue with teaching staff. AS suggested it was a systemic problem across the categories of the NSS - teaching, assessment/feedback, and so on. The major problem is the aloof nature of certain teaching staff not acting upon feedback from students - the example of a first year course was given, that attracted concern from students and was not acted upon, however, the issue has run its course due to departmental policy on teaching courses (4 year cycle).
 - o SG questioned whether training was available to staff to improve their teaching, and the impression was that this depends on the department.

- o LJ raised a precedent from the Dept in that a 2nd Year course was modified due to a low SOLE score, and training was offered to the staff member in question. LJ also stressed the need to push for change, even in the face of seniority, as it is important to deliver for students. The Dept seem to be too willing to make and propagate mistakes.
 - o SG asked whether there was an expectation of poor lecturing and the impression from LJ and AS was affirmative.
 - o AS outlined an action plan to use the poor scores to leverage effective change when the new rep team has been elected, to use the FoNS-level meetings more effectively to pressure staff across the Faculty, and to set concrete deadlines for change as opposed to the traditional 'Review' process.
 - o Across the faculty, changes that are made due to student input or campaigning need to be more visible. An idea given was a termly Newsletter from the Faculty outlining where changes had been made, used to hold the reps and the staff to account in their roles. Using staff member 'allies' to leverage change should be a core strategy of the Rep Team. Also, SOLE responses need to be enforced to achieve an effective dialogue for change. Typically staff members are let to do as they please, which LMc raised as a leadership issue.
2. Maths (EM) - Largely positive reporting. Changes reported on from last year include two changes to teaching staff, although sensitivity in reporting this as a student-led change should be encouraged. Whether or not we worry about staff welfare as well as student welfare is to be considered.
 3. Biology (RC) - A 3% increase in overall NSS score - attributed to the more widespread acceptance of Panopto across the Department of Life Sciences in general. Although some lecturers remain opposed to the use of Panopto, it is much better than in previous years.
 4. Chemistry (MM) - An 11% increase in NSS score - leaving the department in the top ½ of College. Increase largely due to a bad NSS score in the last year, attributed to a badly administered paper that significantly affected grade. A fall in Assessment and Feedback, due to poor or highly variable Viva and Report feedback quality. Uniform marking is hard to achieve but striving for a fair outcome for all students is key. Some poor lecturers for Year 3 modules, issue raised with the department, but the policy of the dept is that staff can only be shuffled to another course and NOT removed outright, as it is in the terms of their contract with the College. Miscommunication of introductory lectures and issues with timetabling were raised - 1st years were scheduled into 4th Year 'Pass-Fail' lectures unnecessarily and the 3rd year lab introduction was raised to the Union President as being in an unsuitable room. The DUGS has been consulted on this and it will be avoided in future.

RESOLVED:

- a. To accept the reports

B. NSS Results at a Faculty Level

RECEIVED: The discussion was led by LMc, SG and LJ

NOTED:

5. **Assessment and feedback was seen as the most consistent failure across FoNS departments. Students want to see more than ticked problem sheets, and the trade between quality and quantity needs to be considered.**
6. **MM and ME noted that Chemistry feedback from their experience tends towards an acceptable level, but the variability of feedback quality has been experienced.**
7. **RC suggested getting model answers or reports to aid student feedback. LJ suggested that with a more sparse resource this could work, but lecturers then believe the students are restricted in their answers. Another issue raised was plagiarism. It was suggested that the staff could provide a sample external to the course that couldn't be directly plagiarised.**
 - o **SG suggested lab reports could be a good sample to start from. LMc suggested that this could be an unnecessary burden on the lecturer, and instead that peer learning through sharing best practice (but NOT lab reports directly - constitutes plagiarism) could be a better way of going about it. AS suggested a compromise in which the teaching assistants (postgrads) could make one as part of their employment in the teaching labs.**
8. **This topic was shelved for future discussion at another AAO meeting, or at the next FoNS SSC meeting.**

RESOLVED:

- b. **To revisit the idea at next meeting as a potential Matter Arising.**

C. Representation in the Five Year Plan

RECEIVED: The discussion was led by LJ

NOTED:

9. **To provide a stronger direction and vision for the Union, LJ has prepared a Plan that will guide the work of the Union for the next 5 years. Aspects involving representation include:**
 - o **Building a 'rep community' - an interdepartmental network for sharing best practice and working towards more effective change.**
 - o **More RCSU responsibility for Rep Training - making the available training more relevant to incoming reps.**
 - o **A 'Rep Handbook' - a reference guide of established practice for the new year reps, in particular first year reps.**
 - o **'Rep Socials' - LMc stated that the Union is planning one but the need to develop a FoNS equivalent is clear.**
 - o **'Rep Awards' - parallel to the existing Colours scheme, recognising only FoNS reps and driving excellence through recognition.**
 - o **An archival system for changes - a system containing information on what has changed and how, leaving future reps in a position to build upon and amplify past achievements. AS suggested adding a 'Representation' section into eActivities, and the idea was proposed to be moved to the next ERB meeting.**
 - o **Reports to the Faculty-at-Large - directly reporting on the issues facing students, recommending changes directly to the FoNS leadership team and making sure we influence change at a Faculty level as well as a departmental level.**
10. **MM noted all the goals were very closely linked.**
11. **ME raised that year reps would be invited to contribute to the RCSU General Committee (next - 26/10/2016).**

12. Other aspects of the plan were reported on with limited relevance to representation.

RESOLVED:

c. Positive opinions throughout the board, no vote taken, consultation will carry on.

D. AOB

NOTED:

13. The office is to be used for Rep meetings and drop in sessions. This is to help reinforce the RCSU community and make the Office the focal point of our operations as it should be. It will also make it easier for 'entry-level' representatives and club officers to get further involved with the running of the Union.

Meeting closed at 13:05.