



Department of Modern Languages and Cultures
Student Staff Liaison Committee: Online Meeting
Tuesday 8 June 2021, 12:00
Minutes

Present:

Staff: Elsa Petit (EP), Mar Encinas Puente (MEP), Frances Goodingham (FG), Nadia Bragina (ND), Robert Gillett (RG)[during Part 2], Tom Wilks (TW: staff co-chair and secretary)

Students: Ali Taha (AT), Alycha Henry (AH) Katrina Fuller (KF), Andrew George (AG: student co-chair)

PART 1 – Preliminary items (Staff Co-Chair and Convenors)

1. Welcome

TW noted that the meeting was not quorate, and that discussions would not necessarily be representative of all language areas, degree types or year groups. The only written reports received from student reps. were to confirm that no responses had been received to consultations or surveys. TW thanked Andrew George for agreeing to chair Part 2.

2. Apologies for absence

Martina Deny; Laetitia Calabrese; Elena Moreira

3. Approval of Minutes (9.4.21)

Approved

4. Responses to actions from last meeting

None: TW had performed his action, and is aware that student reps. have performed theirs, but responses have not been forthcoming. TW expressed gratitude to student reps. for making the effort to consult their cohorts, recognising that the lack of response to consultations was not a fair reflection of these efforts.

PART 2 – Programme Delivery and related matters arising (Student Representatives) (Student Co-Chair)

6. Communication

6.1 Use of email; effectiveness of correspondence between staff and students

AG expressed gratitude on behalf of the Committee to Rosine Smyrl for her sensitive handling of communications to students about Extenuating Circumstances and related matters.

EP noted increasing impatience during the year in email communications from some students to some staff. Impolite messages had been received, to which responses were expected immediately, despite the pressures facing staff with caring and schooling responsibilities. Such messages were also being received outside usual working hours, including (in some cases persistently) over the two May bank holiday weekends. EP recognises that she and many other staff have themselves been working online during evenings and weekends, and some staff have been sending emails at those times out of necessity when time during the standard working day has not been available. However, students and academic staff should *not* perceive sending out-of-hours emails as a norm to which they should conform. (With some likely non-academic exceptions), there should be *no* expectation that these emails be read or responses sent until at least the next standard working day.

TW agreed, but also noted that some students based overseas were unaware of British bank holiday Mondays, and that emails perceived as being intemperate might have been sent in distress.

Action: Student reps. : please feed back to cohorts that there are College (professional) guidelines on email etiquette, which should be followed wherever possible.

MEP: Language co-ordinators are under considerable workload pressure: insensitive emails are especially upsetting at times when teaching preparations are at their most intense. (This intensity is often higher for language teachers than for content teaching.)

AG: Where urgent emails or correspondence outside usual working hours are sent, courtesy is imperative.

KF: Distance from the university milieu has made a weekday/weekend divide harder to recognise for some students.

RG: It is inevitable that the 23:55 (and, before this year, Sunday) coursework deadlines will prompt anxious emails from students to teaching staff in the hours either side of this time point.

6.2 Use of platforms and applications (Collaborate, MS Teams etc.)

TW: Laetitia Calabrese, as Senior Tutor, would welcome feedback on good practices (including platform choices). TW and AG emphasised that online education was not necessarily desirable for everyone in the first place, hence a muted response to it (rather than positive or negative feedback) could also be an important signal.

NB: spoke strongly in favour of Zoom, especially in contrast to Collaborate. Collaborate does not make viewing the whole group easy, and is not as genuinely interactive (e.g. whiteboard writing has to be erased or replaced).

KF: speaking as a student of French rather than in her ILAS capacity, favoured Teams for teaching where files could be shared straightforwardly (as in Laetitia's language teaching).

RG: was concerned that Zoom had not been as readily available as a supported, licenced platform for QMUL at the start of the year: NB had had to request a licence. It was not clear whether Zoom sessions could be integrated into QMPlus as easily as Collaborate sessions. [*TW: Since the meeting, MLC staff have received an indication that Zoom will be more widely supported. It is due to be used in imminent online teaching demonstrations to MLC staff.*]

EP: has the impression that students (especially finalists) are competent in switching between platforms for different teaching sessions. If there are good reasons for using a particular platform for a particular component of the language module, but a different platform for another component, is it reasonable to expect students to shift between them?

KF: any switching between platforms needs to be communicated clearly.

AG: switching between activities such as breakout groups on a platform can be time-consuming.

EP: clarified that the College recognises that concurrent (online and in-person) teaching in the coming academic year can be delivered on different platforms (unlike a year ago, when Collaborate was strongly recommended).

RG: students of first-year Culture and Language would have strongly preferred a single platform to be used all through the year for that module, to avoid confusion.

FG: Portuguese language sessions had been held on Collaborate. Teams had caused her (and AG and TW) hardware crashes, and its high use of memory was inconvenient, especially for those who do not otherwise use Microsoft resources.

NB reiterated that punctual and clear linkage on QMPlus about which platform will be used and when is one of the most important points for staff to consider. Despite her positive experience of Zoom, NB recognises that its initial set-up on a device and its broadband requirements are inconvenient for some users.

TW: Broadband speed is a significant problem (and embarrassment) for students on other platforms too, and should also be taken into consideration when planning the timing and extent of online activity within a teaching session. It was a common reason for non-engagement and non-use of cameras in his seminars this year.

KF detailed how broadband problems were exacerbated for students based remotely when the campus became less accessible to students than had been indicated at the start of the academic year. However, it should not be assumed that accessibility of campus computers would lessen the problem, as Eduroam can be unreliable.

Action: due to this meeting not being quorate, yet attracting extensive and varied responses, TW and NB would like the Committee to continue the discussion about online platforms. Student reps. should seek further feedback about the views expressed above as soon as possible. Next year's first SSLC meeting needs to keep this topic on its agenda.

TW further noted that College-level decisions were inevitably based on the ability to support a particular platform. In March 2020 (Week 9), prior to the College issuing guidance, German tutors had used other platforms as recommended by students. Could a stronger student voice have led to different recommendations?

6.3 Communication about examination period and arrangements beyond the end of this term

KF had received queries from her cohort about details that were explained clearly and accurately in emails sent to all students by Rosine Smyrl and Elena Moreira. It appears that the timing of these emails is not optimal: especially the one that was sent on approx. 17th May. It should be noted that some students do not read emails regularly throughout the year. NB suggested more extensive use of the Assessment tab on QMPlus modules (for information about end-of-year exams, not necessarily specific to each module).

Action: TW to write to Rosine Smyrl, Elena Moreira and the Exams Team to request a rethink about the timing and mode of exam-related

communications, especially for MLC, given the intensity of student work early in the exam period because of language assessments. Following a request by EP, he will also ask for clarification about the work that module convenors will have to do to set up first sits and resits, which we need to receive as soon as possible, as key staff will be on leave at different points during July and August.

TW: are staff (administrative and academic) assuming that students perceive the 'exam period' in the same way as in previous years when desk exams in situ took place after a revision period? Should a more pronounced lead-in period now be designated, during which as many communications about exam arrangements are sent out?

AH: Spanish online exams prompted queries from students, which they posed to each other in online chats. Answers were to be found in emails that had been sent to everyone: but those emails simply weren't the obvious and most accessible reference point for everyone.

KF: recommends much earlier communication about arrangements for students encountering extenuating circumstances during the exam period for each type of assessment. However, as NB pointed out, regulations (centrally) changed during the year, so definitive answers could not be provided very far in advance.

EP: both students and examiners had experienced access difficulties with Sharepoint for oral assessments, for which permission settings sometimes needed to be changed. These difficulties were overcome, but they caused inconvenience and needed more time than anticipated to be addressed. Students had initially been advised to use Loom, not Sharepoint: but the advice was not always followed, and sometimes the students had followed advice they found online about Sharepoint uploads. KF found the Sharepoint arrangements convenient when that advice was followed.

MEP & EP: The online examination process is all the more stressful for students and staff when there are uncertainties about technology. We can only be sure that everything has been set up correctly when submissions arrive. Module convenors have been given extra work this year in setting up and uploading exam areas. Human error inevitably occurs (of which TW is guilty for GER505). Exam administrators are supposed to check, but further errors and inconsistencies have occurred at that stage too. EP advocates clearer, earlier communication about instructions (especially instructions to students about exam procedures, which could be uploaded to QMPlus further in advance of the actual exams).

The discussion turned to examination performance, e.g. where students did not follow instructions about answer length. EP explained that the Language Teaching Committee is considering best practice around whether penalties are appropriate. EP reported that a strong case had been made for language oral assessments to be live rather than recorded from next year, and the Faculty was supportive.

Communications about matters beyond the current academic year:

KF reported that some students had received more emails about Year Abroad preparations than others, but the differences between arrangements most likely meant that the timing and volume of communication would vary anyway.

AG and EP reported different experiences of timing of communications from students about MA applications. Some staff have been receiving unanticipated requests for references for Master's candidates; while some students have been deterred from applying so far by the experience of online delivery over the last year, and by concerns that it might still be imposed widely in September. TW added that application timings tend to vary anyway: joint honours students favouring Business or Management MScs (for example) might make several applications to different institutions, including during the summer.

NB: will be taking over Martina Deny's current role as Departmental Year Abroad Co-Ordinator from July.

Action: NB will remind second-year students that they need to have passed the second year before they can proceed to the Year Abroad.

However, language convenors are not yet aware of all the students who are at risk of not meeting this requirement: many EC claims are pending until the EC sub-board has met later in June. TW is aware that students in all years who are awaiting communications about their claims following this board meeting are very anxious. There are particular problems for second years in French, as French and Francophone academic years begin relatively early: EP reiterated concerns she had expressed to the last SSLC meeting and to the exams team over a longer period. Language convenors and advisors need to know of anyone at risk of not gaining sufficient credits for the year as soon as possible.

Action: TW to add this point to his requests to teaching and examination administrators.

7. Learning, Teaching and Assessment

7.1 Online examination arrangements (May-June; August first sits; resits)

NB: Language co-ordinators need information about which students are offered these. New tasks need to be set (e.g. for orals), and technical arrangements are more complex than for essay submissions on QMPlus.

KF: in view of the likely increase in numbers of students having first sit or resit arrangements confirmed for this summer, anxious emails from them to convenors and teaching staff are anticipated over the next two months. Availability of staff for consultation or even for receipt of emails is not always clear: the best practice is for staff taking leave or who are otherwise engaged to prepare automated responses to emails indicating the duration of their absence or likely delay in responding.

Action: TW to feed back to Jeremy Hicks, our Head of Department, and RG (who had to leave the meeting, now running over time), suggesting discussion at our next departmental staff meeting on 16 June. This is a sensitive issue, about which some staff need more guidance than others (including technical guidance). The Department/ sections also need to decide the best points of contact for particular kinds of academic queries when a tutor, convenor or advisor is unavailable, and whether that level of signposting should be included routinely in out-of-office emails.

EP: reported from the SLLF Education Committee that consideration is being given to differentiation within the EC system to 'one-off' claims, specific to a

unit of assessment, and claims for circumstances that are anticipated to continue to affect students over time and across modules

AG: suggested that a distinction between these types of claim could be the student's control over circumstances. However, in the last 15 months, most people have had less control over their circumstances; and making repeated claims is in itself stressful and time-consuming. On the other hand, some students have reported that they feel making repeated EC claims is demonstrable, confidence-boosting legitimisation of their predicaments.

7.2 Coursework submission arrangements and deadlines

7.3 Feedback on coursework

7.4 Year Abroad preparations (second year students)

No comments were forthcoming

8. Central Learning Resources

8.1 Library and E-learning facilities and resources (books, journals, catalogue, learning support etc.)

Library:

TW reminded the Committee that an interim Liaison Librarian, Ruth Russell, is now in post during Rich Evans's paternity leave until September, but only started some time after Rich had left.

AG raised a range of practical problems, which he had reported within the Library.

-- While the Library maintains a study space booking requirement, the process is proving time-consuming. There is a 15-minute delay between cancelling and rebooking a slot. The booking requirement in itself has had the benefit of guaranteeing a workspace during the busiest time of the year.

--The study spaces have been noisy during the exam period, disrupting students who use the space for reading and revision: monitoring of these spaces to ensure they are used quietly has been less visible than in previous years.

--Charging points for laptop batteries (etc.) are not all compatible/functional across the space available.

--Practices of book retrieval have been inconsistent: Library staff have sometimes insisted on click-and-collect arrangements, but there have been instances when they have retrieved books for students on request in situ.

--There have been instances when a book has had to be requested three days in advance, but the book has not been found and no appropriate member of staff is available to investigate on the day of (anticipated) delivery. Up to five more days have been needed for the book to be retrieved.

TW has already been in contact with Ruth Russell about difficulties both staff and students are experiencing with the Library online catalogue: the Library is looking into these; and MLC academic staff have provided screen shots of typical misleading or unclear catalogue entries.

Actions:

TW, as departmental Library Lead, will ask Ruth Russell to escalate discussion of AG's concerns within the Library:

Student reps. should remind their cohorts that the Library offers training and support all through the year, e.g. on research and referencing skills needed for essays and dissertations which they are preparing over the summer for first sits.

Careers:

TW informed the Committee that Andrea Cox, Careers Consultant for SLLF, is leaving QMUL on 16 June to take up a post at KCL. We thank Andrea for her excellent work, which continues until her departure with prominent contributions to the current series of skills events (publicised recently on QMPlus; details announced from there to all students in late May). Andrea assures us that consultants who are familiar with humanities subjects will be available for student consultations during the summer. Andrea's successor has been recruited, and will be in post by September.

8.2 QMPlus (non-curricular, e.g. SLLF Undergraduate, SLLF Careers)

8.3 Information Technology (software/applications etc. not covered above)

No comments were forthcoming

9. Academic, pastoral and central service support

No comments were forthcoming

PART 3 – Student Reports (Student Representatives)

Discussion in this section will concentrate on programme-level and year-level experience (i.e. not on specific option modules).

10. Reports from student course representatives (First, Second and Final Year) covering any matters not addressed above:

10.1 French

10.2 German

10.3 ILAS / Hispanic Studies

10.4 Portuguese

10.5 Russian

Reps. were thanked for their efforts in consulting, even where (in several cases) no responses were received from their cohorts.

11. Student Representation for 2021-22

NB prompted the Committee to consider the frequency of meetings next year. There are now many time pressures from different kinds of meetings, not least the SLLF-wide SSLC. TW acknowledged that earlier meetings would have been preferable, but we are restricted in Semester 1 by the SU process of electing and training reps.

Actions:

a) Any first year reps. who do not wish to continue on the SSLC next year, and any second year reps. who do not wish to serve on the Year Abroad SSLC next year, should contact TW and their language convenor as soon as possible, so that the process of finding a new rep. can start as soon as possible.

b) Please refer any suitable candidates for vacancies (encouragingly!) to the relevant Language Convenor.

c) Arrangements for meeting frequency, the Year Abroad SSLC and the size and format of the Committee will all need to be revisited in September. Any recommendations you have now should be communicated to your Convenor and TW as soon as possible (e.g. whether to have a designated rep. for beginners' language pathways

which have a certain number of students on them, and/or for joint honours programmes).

12. Any Other Business

In thanking the Committee, especially those who had joined the online meetings or sent apologies for absence during the year, TW noted that it is not untypical for a meeting at this point in the year to have fewer members attending, and for feedback on surveys and consultations to be more limited than usual. The length of most meetings has been greater than anticipated: TW recognises that either much sharper chairing or a more streamlined selection of business on the agenda is likely to be necessary in future, especially if fewer meetings are held during the year. Potential co-chairs for next year should take note.

TW thanked AG for his chairmanship, which sets an important precedent: AG has proved that student co-chairing works. Next year's SSLC reps. have a fine example to follow, and should have no hesitation in volunteering for this position.

TW thanks all members who have attended the online meetings this year or sent apologies for their efforts in maintaining a functional and usually quorate SSLC in challenging circumstances.