

Oxford University Department of Materials Academic Committee

DMAC 45 Minutes of the Academic Committee held at 2.00 pm on Monday 28th January 2008 in the Wolfson Meeting Room.

Present: JMS, CRMG, PDN, AOT (Chair).

In attendance: ICS (Secretary), Dave Armstrong (Outgoing JCCG Chair) (Items 1&2), Helen Boffey (JCCU Chair) (Items 1-3).

1. Apologies & Welcome

Apologies for absence were received from KQOR, DJHC, MRC and Karleen Dudeck (Incoming JCCG Chair).

DMAC welcomed PDN to his first meeting as a full member of the committee.

2. Report from the Chair of JCCG (DA)

- Access to the Department Workshop. JCCG thanked DMAC for having supported JCCG's request for the introduction of a 'super-user' status for extended access to the Department's workshop. The Department Administrator and Chief Workshop Technician had rejected the proposal on health & safety grounds, but the Chief Workshop Technician will consider all requests for supervised extended use if a student can show that he/she has used all available standard hours. Although this outcome was not all that JCCG had hoped for they saw it as a positive resolution. JCCG will draft an informal proforma for applying for such extended time.

Action: JCCG

- JCCG raised concern over the availability of SEMs for Part II students during the first three weeks of Hilary Term. Both SEMs that were normally available to Part II students had been block-booked for the new 3rd year Characterisation module during weeks 1&2, and one of them had been additionally block-booked for a regular training course during week 3. The two basic instruments were the only SEMs available for Part II use because it was not possible for Part II students to become sufficiently experienced to become approved users of more sophisticated microscopes. It was reported that a large proportion of the block-booking in weeks 1&2 had in fact been used. It was agreed that Part II students would be pre-warned of this lack of availability in future years, but that if sessions were not used during the Characterisation module then they should be made available with priority to Part II and 1st year graduate students. This might also be applied to daytime bookings in wk0 (including use for modular courses). AOT will liaise with CJDH & MRC.

Action: AOT

3. Report from the Chair of JCCU (HB)

- JCCU reported that students had been consulted on the format of practical reports. There was an approximately equal split in preference between hand-written and word processed reports. It was noted that it would not be possible for DMAC to consider the issue of word processed reports again until the University had implemented plagiarism detection software. Students also requested greater guidance on requirements for practical reports. The question of training in error analysis for prelims was raised, and DMAC noted that some work was ongoing on this issue.

- JCCU had considered the outcome of the 2007 OSCEQ survey and noted that whilst the survey raised a large volume of work and academic pressure as negative issues students felt that they were at Oxford and should be prepared for such pressures.
- JCCU raised further concern over the content of the 1st year Introduction to Computing practical. Student members of JCCU have been actioned to compile a list of comments/issues for PJW to consider.

4. Minutes of DMAC 44 (DMAC 45/1)

The minutes of DMAC 44 were accepted.

5. Shortened Minutes

There were no confidential items to be removed from the minutes to be published on the Department of Materials website.

6. Matters Arising

*From DMAC 27

**Minute 4 Report from JCCU Chair:*

Practical Classes Possibility of submitting reports in word-processed format. JMS has provided a lead on information on software for the detection of plagiarism. AOT is investigating its use and attended a half-day workshop on plagiarism in June 2006. AOT noted that EPSC has now produced some guidance on plagiarism.

AOT reported that the University is now trialling plagiarism detection software called “Turnitin” in two departments (Law and Computing).

In progress: AOT

*From DMAC 32

**Minute 11iv Report from the Faculty: Guidance to Supervisors* AOT and CRMG will adapt the guidance from the EPSC. Andrew Watt, as part of his CDF duties, will assist in taking this forward, has been briefed by AOT and will produce a final version for DMAC in wk7 TT08.

Action: AARW

*From DMAC 37

**Minute 4ii 2nd Year Polymers* HEA has agreed to take the lead on the overall review of polymers teaching.

Action: HEA

From DMAC 41

Minute 10i Report from the Tutors' Committee (LJFJ): Writing Skills (DMAC 41/5) DMAC noted that five Materials colleges/tutors have some provision for writing skills training, and would like to see all Materials colleges/tutors to provide some form of training such that the students' ability to articulate a well structured, coherent scientific argument is enhanced. AOT will look into what provision, if any, the Language Centre has for more basic English language skills, as DMAC identified a lack of such skills in some cases.

Action: AOT

AOT reported that the Language Centre has neither provision nor funding for native English speakers. The Language Centre had informed him that colleges have funding for support of native English speakers. Action completed (AOT)

AOT has suggested to Tutors that they might use the new Divisional lecture series on Energy & Climate Change as a vehicle for an essay writing exercise. In light of the Language Centre's response DMAC supported a proposal for AOT to ask Tutors via the Tutors' Committee to report on how students with weak English are supported (particularly with a view to the Department's QAA justification).

Action: AOT

From DMAC 43

***Minute 3ii Report from the Chair of JCCG (DA): Access to the Common Room** JCCG had expressed its disappointment that access to the common room was now generally denied outside of 8.00 am – 2.00 pm unless individual's swipe cards had been activated for a specific purpose. AOT has spoken with the Department Administrator about the matter. The most recent plan is that students will have access to the common room during the normal working day (8.00 am – 6.00 pm), although this could perhaps be extended to 7.00 pm. DA responded that he thought this would be acceptable to JCCG for weekdays, but that JCCG would like to have access at the weekends in addition. CRMG suggested that DMAC should press for as open access as possible to the common room given that the card swipe system is capable of logging access and that there are CCTV cameras in the corridor. DMAC supported this suggestion, and AOT will take the matter forward but requested that HoDs of Materials and Eng. Sci. first determine together a policy on this issue.

Action: CRMG

[Secretary's Note: Through DC, AOT has requested that a memo be issued to clarify access rules.]

***Minute 4i Report from the Chair of JCCU (AZ): Industrial Visits (DMAC 43/2)** Following a discussion on Industrial Visits DMAC concluded that in future all students should submit one, and be encouraged to submit two reports on Self-organised visits. The Exam Regulations and Course Handbooks will be updated accordingly.

In progress: ICS/LJFJ/AOT

AOT and ICS noted that if cohort sizes were to increase to 36 as the Department desired, then it would be necessary for additional Department Organised visits to be put in place. CRMG agreed to explore with PJD whether an annual 'Begbroke' visit could be put in place that included spin-out companies and BegbrokeNano as a commercial enterprise.

Action: CRMG

It was noted that the Student Materials Society were organising a visit to the EM laboratories at Begbroke.

Minute 4ii Report from the Chair of JCCU (AZ): Options Courses & Introductory Lectures Following a discussion on introductory lectures to the 3rd year DMAC requested that JCCU advise students to read the course handbook and synopses and then to discuss Options with their College Tutors.

Action: AZ/HB

AOT agreed to give a 15 minute lecture on the structure of the new Options scheme to the current 3rd year students if they decide they need it after having read the course literature. JCCU should inform him if such a lecture is desired.

Action: AZ/HB

AOT reported that JCCU now considered that there was sufficient information available and an introductory lecture was unnecessary.

***Minute 8iv Examiners' Reports (DMAC 43/4): Draft Response to Examiners' Reports (DMAC 43/5)** The issue of setting penalties for late submission of Part II theses was raised incidentally. AOT, after discussion with RIT (2006/07 Chairman of Examiners) and AC (current Chairman of Examiners), will prepare a proposal for possible implementation in 2008/09.

Action: AOT/ICS

***From DMAC 44**

***Minute 8 MPLSD Draft Comments on EPSC Draft of Section 2 of the University's Briefing Document for the Institutional Auditors in 2009 (DMAC 44/5)** It was noted that MPLS Division requires comments by 9th week of MT07. A working party comprising AOT, CRMG and JMS will consider the paper in detail and draft a response.

Action: AOT/CRMG/JMS

***Minute 9 GP3 Macroplasticity & Mechanical Working Processes Course Content** RIT had reported by email that he and Paul Butler (the lecturer) had met. DMAC endorsed proposals that the lecturer should make clear to the students that Part I examination questions would reflect the content of the wholly new course and that material already covered in other lecture courses should be cut from the Macroplasticity course. It was noted that the content of the tutorial question sheet had not apparently been addressed. AOT and ICS will follow up on this specific issue.

In progress: AOT/ICS

***Minute 11iii Report from the Divisional Undergraduate Studies Advisory Panel (AOT) – (a) Research-Teaching Nexus** The University is putting together evidence for the importance having active researchers / scholars as teachers, to combat apparent government views that the link is not important. The MPLS Division requests departmental comments by 1st wk of HT08. A working party comprising AOT, AJW and JMS will consider the matter further and prepare a response on behalf of Materials.

Action: AOT/AJW/JMS

7. Draft QAA Benchmark Statement 2007 for Materials (DMAC 45/2)

JMS, who had sat on the panel for the current Benchmark Statement, reported that the panel had considered that the review required only a light touch. DMAC noted that the attainment levels for BEng now included only the first three of the original four levels, but this was of no concern for the Oxford Materials MEng courses. AOT noted that the attainment levels did not map on to the CVCP description of degree class boundaries. DMAC looked specifically at paragraphs 3.2 Lifecycle Analysis etc and 3.6 General Engineering, but concluded that the Oxford Materials degree courses contained satisfactory provision in these areas. Overall, there was no concern that the Oxford Materials degree courses did not map onto the proposed Benchmark Statement 2007. ICS will inform the Division.

Action: ICS

[Secretary's Note: Action completed (ICS)]

8. Student Surveys

i. National Student Survey (DMAC 45/3)

DMAC considered the paper to be for information only given that it was not subject specific for Materials Science.

ii. Oxford Student Course Experience Questionnaire (DMAC 45/4)

There had been 12 responses from Materials students (5 yr3 MS, 5 yr4 MS, 2 MEM). The results of a number of specific questions were considered:

Q2 There was a lot of unwanted academic pressure on me as a student Approximately one third of respondents agreed with this statement. However, in comparison only 8% of respondents agreed with *Q22 The academic expectations of me on this course were too high*. This comparison outlines the difficulty of interpreting the responses to such questions.

Q3 My teachers normally gave me helpful feedback on my progress 83% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement compared with 61% for MPLS respondents as a whole. DMAC welcomed this positive response.

Q4 The workload was too heavy 25% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement compared with 32% for MPLS respondents as a whole.

Q5 The course helped me develop my ability to work as part of a group Materials respondents were significantly more positive about this statement than MPLS respondents as a whole (58% agreed and 0% disagreed for Materials compared with 33% agreed and 41% disagreed for MPLS).

Q7 I have found the course motivating The response for Materials respondents was much improved over the previous year.

Q10 Since being at Oxford, I feel more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems Again the response for Materials respondents was much improved over the previous year. The responses to Qs7&10 have shown large improvements despite no specific action being taken in response to these questions last year. DMAC concluded that careful attention to JCCU is a better route to improving student satisfaction than the OSCEQ survey.

Q12 It was always easy to know the standard of tutorial work expected 24% of Materials respondents disagreed with this statement. AOT reported that JCCU have expressed no real concern over the response to this question. DMAC concluded that given the year on year fluctuation in response there is no evidence to suggest there is a problem. AOT will bring this to the attention of college tutors.

Q15 I was generally given enough time to understand the things I had learnt 67% of Materials respondents disagreed with this statement, but in considering this in conjunction with other questions DMAC felt that the response to *Q15* reflects the stretching nature of an Oxford degree and was not demotivating.

Q25 It was made clear right from the start what is expected from students 33% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement compared with 42% of MPLS respondents as a whole. Tutors will be made aware of this.

Q27 My teachers put a lot of time into comments (orally and/or in writing) on my work Only 17% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement which DMAC considered to be at odds with the 83% that agreed with *Q3 My teachers normally gave me helpful feedback on my progress*.

Q30 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this course 92% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement, which DMAC considered to be very welcome.

Q31 Tutorials were more about me showing tutors how much I had learned in the subject areas than about developing my understanding 33% of Materials respondents agreed with this statement, which DMAC noted for information.

Q 33 in my experience tutorials given by graduate students were a less valuable learning experience than tutorials given by other university staff and Q34 the proportion of my tutorials given by graduate students was approximately... 92% of Materials respondents reported that 20% or fewer of their tutorials were given by graduate students. DMAC welcomed the result that 75% of Materials respondents felt that those tutorials were not less valuable than tutorials given by university staff.

9. The Use of Bilingual Dictionaries in Prelims (DMAC 45/5)

DMAC did not feel strongly about the issue of bilingual dictionaries and considered this to be a matter for the Proctors. AOT will inform the Chair of Prelims.

Action: AOT

10. MMES Performance Statistics for Materials and Earth Sciences (DMAC 45/6)

Earth Sciences have recognised that their students are weaker at maths than Materials students, and wish to continue with the MMES course as it stands. Analysis of the results for Materials students shows that results are better for parts of the course given by NG and MLG than those given by Earth Sciences.

11. Training in Computer Programming

RIT had raised informally the question of whether there was a need to provide undergraduates with a basic level of training in computer programming. He and AOT have each spoken with DGP who thought that it would be useful and could be provided for a language such as Visual BASIC, although knowledge of programming was not a requirement for the 3rd year Options Module in materials modelling. AOT reported that JCCU had no real desire for training in programming.

DMAC concluded that computer programming is a generic skill and not something for the Department to consider given the already high workload on students. AOT and ICS will explore the provision available to students from OUCS.

Action: AOT/ICS

It was noted that the holder of the new chair in Modelling may wish to explore this issue in the future.

12. Development of a Contingency Plan for the University's Examination System in a Year Disrupted by a Pandemic (DMAC 45/7)

DMAC considered this question, and concluded that the University is likely to close in such circumstances, and that in any case the principal for a large body of ill students should be the same as that for a small number of ill students in any other year. Of the three options presented in DMAC 45/7 DMAC concluded that option 3 was appropriate: "To require those who were unable to sit Finals to withdraw and return a year later, much as is done now for the small number of unfortunates who fall ill".

13. Report from the Tutors' Committee (AOT)

- Tutors will revisit the grading criteria for undergraduate admissions in order to provide greater differentiation between candidates at the top end of the grading.
- The Tutors' Committee requested DMAC to consider if it is possible and/or desirable to reduce the contact hours for core 2nd year material.

AOT reported that his latest analysis of contact hours showed that 2nd year MS students received 15.2 hrs/wk excluding tutorial preparation and coursework write-up, which was not dissimilar to that received by 1st year students in the 20 weeks 1st year teaching, and compares with 10.8 hrs/wk received by 3rd years (excluding new HT options module and preparation for classes). DMAC concluded that whilst the 2nd year is intellectually challenging, the students do not have the pressure of exams and have a long time to assimilate the material.

14. Report from the EMS Standing Committee (LJFJ)

There were no matters to be raised. The EMS Standing Committee will not meet in TT08, but will meet for the final time in MT08 to consider examiners' reports.

15. Reports from Divisional Committees

i. Academic Committee (JMS)

- The development of a University Science Centre is still under discussion; DivAC were concerned that the cost of this should not fall upon the Departments.
- The Common Framework for Admissions is still under development, but an appropriate cross-divisional framework has not yet been defined.
- Consideration is being given to Recommendation 1 of the Review of the MPLS Division: to 're-evaluation of the first year undergraduate course, with a view to more widely based work in the first year'.
- The Division might consider new graduate taught courses if they were aligned with EPSRC priorities or if specific funding was available.
- A working party is looking at the potential introduction of a Divisional Graduate School.

ii. Undergraduate Access Advisory Panel (AOT)

EPSC has begun work on a strategy to increase admissions from state schools.

16. Chairman's Report

- The MPLS Divisional lectures on Energy & Climate Change are running.
- A case of copying of a practical class report has been identified. The colleges concerned, AJW (as Practical Class Organiser) and AOT have agreed to treat this case as a training issue, and not to take it to the Proctors on this occasion.
- EPSC is encouraging all departments to hold a 'Finals Forum' for advising students on coping with exams and exam/revision strategy. AOT reported that neither Tutors nor JCCU thought this was necessary. LJFJ has suggested that providing students with a 2-page booklet based on advice provided by St Hilda's College to its students.

[Secretary's Note: JMS has volunteered to assist with the OUSU Finals Forum this year and JTC has offered to help with this in future if given sufficient advance notice.]

- The post for LJFJ's maternity cover has been filled. The successful candidate, who has previous experience of academic administration, will start on 5 February.

17. Any Other Business

There was no further business.

Date of the next meeting – 2.00 pm Monday 25th February 2008, Wolfson Meeting Room. The meeting closed at 3.59 pm.