

Sustainable Development

Staff-Student Liaison Committee

12th March 2014, Meeting Room 5, CMB – 1.30 p.m.

MINUTES

Present: Sophie Cheney, Liz Teixeira de Mattos, Rebecca Bamlett, Claire Haggett, Isabelle Darmon

Minutes: Sue Renton

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and there were no matters arising.

Claire welcomed the students, thanked them for attending and for taking on the position of Class Rep, which is much appreciated by staff.

- **Sophie Cheney (1st Year)**

1) Feedback Science and Society 1b: Sophie reported on the results of a survey from the first years on SS1b. In general, most students were enjoying the course, and feedback on the quality of the teaching was rated at between 6/10 to 9/10. There was feedback that the lecturer is very enthusiastic and her enthusiasm is apparent in her lectures. Some students felt there were too many case studies and that the lectures focused on individual case studies instead of 'science as a social practice', although others were enjoying the case studies. The survey found that students thought that lectures did clearly deal with the required readings, which are easily accessible. The lecturer is enthusiastic although lectures do tend to overrun.

The essay word count was felt to be low at 1,000 and is more of investigative report. Students also felt unsure of what was expected and found it difficult to discuss the course themes. The suggestion of a 1600 word essay, in line with other courses, would be preferred. It would be beneficial to students if essay questions were to be provided at the start of the course. Tutorial feedback was mixed (the survey found that feedback varied between an average 5/10 to an excellent 9/10 for the quality of the teaching), but themes tied in well and it was felt that the course fitted well into the overall degree programme.

In a discussion about SS1b, Claire reported that the course content had changed since last year as a result of discussions with Emma Frow (course convenor) over the summer. It was also discussed that while there were reports of some students not liking SS1b, it is usually the case that those who are unhappy report this, and those who are very happy or okay do not – and the results of the survey suggest that most students are happy with the course. There was a discussion about whether SS1b and SSE should be swapped around (SS1b in second year, SSE in first year).

ACTIONS: Claire – to explore the possibility of having a tutorial group just for MA SD students (this is likely to be foremost a timetabling issue)

Claire – to discuss with Emma the timing of receiving the questions, word count and instructions for the essay

2) Fundamentals and PALS: Fundamentals received positive feedback and gives an opportunity for students to work closely together and this would be welcomed in Sustainable Development. Claire explained that there isn't capacity for this to happen at present, however, but that she, Sue and Isabelle are looking at other ways for the students to come together as a group – for example, Sue announced that she had sent an email invitation to all 1st-3rd year students to attend a discussion on a Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS) to be piloted, initially in SPS for first year Sustainable Development students starting in September 2014. This will take place on Wednesday 19th March, 12.30-1.30 in 6th floor staff room.

Claire thanked Sophie for all her hard work in organising the feedback survey for 1st year students and that it was greatly appreciated by the Committee.

- **Liz Teixeira de Mattos (2nd Year):**

1) Sustainability, Society and the Environment: Liz said that some students were not enjoying the course, and thought that it repeated ideas from first year and was not challenging enough (and might be better as a first year course). Students said that SSE was not of as high a quality as SD1a and SD2a. In SSE, there was a preference for more discussion of topics at tutorials and more continuous assessment and readings was reported. Students are struggling with the required readings as the books are not readily available in the Library. Sue encouraged students to contact the new SPS Academic Support Librarians which she had informed all students by email about, although the SSE course organiser also has a responsibility to make sure books are available. Claire stressed that students not attending the course are missing out on world-class guest lecturers. Liz will check which students are not attending as there is great concern that the taxi service SPS provided (which was very difficult to arrange) will be jeopardised for future students on the degree.

There was a discussion about the course, and Claire said that because it is the only sustainability course that many students take, it is inevitable that there will be some overlap at the start, dealing with issues such as what sustainable development means. There have been a number of exceptional staffing problems with the course this year, which have never happened before, and which hopefully will not be repeated. If students are finding some of the issues easy/or a reinforcement of what they have already learnt, it is hoped that they will take this opportunity to do really well in the course.

Liz said that she was unclear about the exam format and content. **UPDATE:** Claire has confirmed that the last lecture on the course will be about the exam and revision; details of the format are in the SSE Handbook; and students are encouraged to look, as directed, at previous exam papers.

ACTIONS: Claire – will talk to Claire Bannister, the School's Undergraduate Administrative Officer about swapping SSE/SS1b around, again likely to be primarily a timetabling issue

- 2) Progression to Honours:** Students have requested that a group meeting for all 2nd years take place to discuss the transition to Honours. Liz said that some students were unclear of what courses they were due to take in third year. It was noted that some students were unaware of the degree programme handbook, and Liz bravely volunteered her computer for a live demonstration of where the degree handbooks are! There are SD pages on the School website, which have the SD degree programme handbook, the dissertation handbook, and the core course handbooks. One idea proposed by students was to create a Learn page to coordinate all important documents for the course and streamline communications, but this may not be possible (Learn is for courses rather than a degree as a whole), and there are the SD web pages for documents.

ACTIONS: Claire to resend link to all students with the SD School web pages, which include all the Handbooks

Claire and Isabelle will organise a 'transition to honours' information meeting, likely to be during the exam period (date to follow)

- 3) Compulsory SD course:** This had been raised by Rebecca as third year rep at the last meeting, and Liz reported that students would appreciate having a compulsory SD course in first semester of third year. Isabelle informed the committee that in light of this feedback received at the last SSLC, discussions are currently underway about developing a new SD course for first semester third year. This course is likely to be called 'Global Perspectives' and will hopefully be available from 2015/16. There was a useful discussion about whether this would be a compulsory or optional course, and it was suggested by students that perhaps making this course 'strongly recommended' would be most helpful.

Claire also said that the SD Dissertation workshops that she runs in first semester third year are compulsory for SD third years (and only open to them).

- 4) SD subject matter:** Students would like to have the opportunity of hands on experience with placements/internships, but lack of staff capacity to oversee this is likely to hinder it (there are two MSc degrees in the School which offer placements, but they have a full time member of staff to run them). Claire said that the Careers Service keeps a lot of information about internships, and students who are interested are encouraged to contact the CS. This topic will also be covered at the SD Careers Workshop being organised next week. Rebecca will report back on the Outreach system which is presently in place at Geosciences. More diversity in subject matter would be appreciated: business/economics, developing world, renewable energy, environmental justice, resource conflict, political struggles. Students would like to have more of an emphasis on case studies as this would help

improve understanding of sustainable development issues. During this discussion, the variety of courses that students can take, which do cover and include these issues, was discussed. Students were encouraged to refer to the degree programme handbook and the DRPS, and to discuss with Claire and Isabelle any courses they are interested in taking. In the list of recommended courses in the handbook, one student has suggested that South Asian Studies be added to the list.

ACTIONS: Claire to add South Asian studies to the list

- 5) **Overall:** Liz said that overall students are very happy and very much appreciate the help and support they receive from Sue, Isabelle and Claire, as great professors and a great SSO. Students really enjoyed “wine night”/ the New Year welcome back evening and would like to see more of these community events in the semester.

UPDATE: The next SD party is on Friday 28th March from 4-6 in the sixth floor common room.

- **Rebecca Bamlett (3rd Year):**

- 1) **Cases in Sustainable Development:** Whilst students enjoyed studying with other SD students, they had found that the course was not particularly well organised at the beginning and the relevance of the initial lectures was not made clear. Some lectures were not well prepared. They felt that the course lacked the theoretical grounding that they had been told that it had last year, and that this has impacted upon their essays. An overview or list of theories would assist with this issue and Rebecca will discuss this with the course organiser.

ACTION: Claire to discuss with the Cases in SD course convenor

- 2) **Dissertation proposals:** The Dissertation Workshops run by Claire received excellent feedback and provided a positive network for students studying on different pathways. Some deadlines have been changed in pathways, which have led to confusion amongst some students. Claire is very aware of this and has been pursuing this issue to ensure that it does not happen again in future and will be attending the Undergraduate Teaching Committee Meeting next week to discuss it further.

ACTION: Claire to report back from UTC meeting

There was an interesting discussion about fourth years presenting their dissertations to third year students, to give them an idea of the sorts of topics they are researching, and the methods they are using. This was agreed to be a very good idea – it would provide fourth years with an opportunity to condense and present their work for a new audience, which is a useful skill for when prospective employers for example ask about dissertations; and it would be very

useful for third years to hear about the sort of research that was being undertaken.

ACTION: Claire to organise a dissertation presentation workshop for Semester 1, 2014/2015.

- 3) Innovative Learning Week:** There appeared to be a good range of activities in relation to sustainable development but some were found not to be engaging for social science students. A range of SPS friendly activities specifically directed at Sustainable Development students, with a less science-oriented base, would be more inclusive and welcomed. There was also some confusion about events only being available to postgraduate students and this should be made clearer in 2014-2015. Claire had sent round the information about events across the University and had contacted some students individually about events that might be of interest to them. There was a discussion about attendance at ILW events, and that many events were poorly attended by students (who took the opportunity to visit family or carry on with their studies).

ACTION: Claire to make sure that students are well informed about relevant ILW events next year.

- 4) External events:** thanks was given to Claire for keeping the students very informed and up to date!

- 5) Pathway recognition:** A student had reported that they were unclear about whether their pathway could be included in the name of their degree. Claire reported that in light of the feedback about this at the last SSLC she had spoken to Paul Norris, Deputy Director of Undergraduate Teaching, and confirmed again that the degree title cannot be changed. Claire and Isabelle reiterated that the degree title of MA SD has greater flexibility and again stressed that any written student references would strongly emphasise the pathways, and that students can give their pathway on their CV, and that it will be very clear from their transcript which pathway they have followed. Claire offered to send another email around to all students setting this out again, but the students on the committee said that they did not feel that this was necessary. Claire encouraged any students who are not clear about this to get in touch with her to discuss it.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING: will be in Semester 1, 2014/2015. Date and venue to be confirmed.

Claire and Isabelle thanked the student reps very much for all their effort and participation.