Annual Academic Monitoring - Dissemination Event

'Sub Honours Assessment Group – Report to Proctor Nov 2012

This group discussed alternative forms of assessment at sub-Honours, particularly those intended as research-linkage exercises. The School of Divinity has recently engaged in a major curriculum review, intended to make progression more transparent and to explicitly identify and instil research skills in students. In the reflective process involved in this review, the School recognised that many students fail to properly process what they read: when asked to summarise assigned reading, they list bullet-points of detail, rather than distilling the argument. This problem was identified in Honours students and was seen to be widespread, stemming from prior educational experience. The School has introduced summary-writing as part of sub-Honours (and junior Honours) assessment, with a view to developing critical skills among students and making these transparent. A set of criteria has been published for these in the School handbook. Summaries are typically to be 250 words long, and examples are provided from short book reviews in journals. The task has been well-received by students and tutors have reported that they consider it to have been an effective means of developing critical thinking.

A second task was discussed more briefly, that of assigning a bibliography exercise to students. This task is intended to build library skills, as well as to foster awareness of appropriate academic literature, sources and referencing.

The group discussed a number of practical points related to these tasks. The most important of these was the issue of cost: the grading of such tasks, if they are weekly (as in Divinity), can be expensive, as it takes time for tutors to mark and provide feedback. There are other approaches to providing formative feedback on summaries, however, such as integrating them into the discussion time of tutorials and even engaging in peer grading that is non-summative.

Participants
Grant Macaskill, School of Divinity
Caron Gentry, School of International Relations
Charles Lovatt, School of Management
Paula Miles, School of Psychology & Neuroscience
Martyn Quick, School of Mathematics & Statistics
Antje Kohnle, School of Physics & Astronomy
Elise Hugueny-Leger, School of Modern Languages
Alex Davis, School of English
Alexander Long, School of Classics
Lisa Jones, School of Philosophical, Anthropological & Film Studies

November 2012
Addendum

Further to the annual monitoring learning & teaching dissemination event held in October, staff at the School of Physics & Astronomy have planned the actions below for implementation in the 2013/14 session concerning Research Skills at Subhonours. Antje Kohnle was present at the dissemination event and the working lunch on this topic. Note that the projects implemented in Divinity and described at the dissemination event (reading summaries and annotated bibliographies) were not directly suited to Physics. Involved in the discussions in Physics are Cameron Rae (Head of Labs), Tom Brown (First year physics coordinator), Bruce Sinclair (DoT), Lucy Hadfield, Paul Cruikshank and Antje Kohnle.

PH1011 Laboratory Skills Development

Over the course of recent years it has become clear that there is a developing mismatch between our expectations of entrant students’ laboratory skills and what their actual skills base is. Whilst we have implemented some incremental changes to adapt to the changing background of our incoming students, we see a growing occurrence of basic skills being overlooked by students as they progress through their studies and believe that the time has come for a more significant change to the teaching structure of our formative laboratory classes that will:

• provide a reliable skill set to students’ that is implemented and can be built on in their further studies
• enhance the development of skills that are particularly lacking
• provide a link between the practical skills developed, taught lecture course material and demonstrate relevance to future careers
• continue to have a rigorous and transparent assessment structure.

We seek to develop the PH1011 teaching lab by identifying a set of core competencies and building a syllabus around these. We envisage that the delivery of this syllabus will feature demonstrators acting in a much more pro-active way, by leading teaching sessions in particular skills. A key goal is then that these skills become explicitly taught and reinforced, rather than relying on them being “picked up” by students though the course of their experiments. Skills taught will include measuring and recording of data, uncertainty measurement and propagation, graphical data analysis including mathematical skills such as linearization of data and lab notebook keeping.

Bruce Sinclair and Antje Kohnle
November 2012