

Philosophy Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) 2019/20

Wednesday 20th Nov 2019, 12pm

7.01, Dugald Stewart Building

MINUTES

Student Representation; Year 1: Rainier Pilotte and Monika Zon Year 2: Steven Anderson (from 1pm), Year 3: Jose Luis Neira and Siena Wotherspoon, Year 4: Rebecca Stoll and Eilidh Northridge

Staff Representation; Dr Wolfgang Schwarz, Dr Guy Fletcher, Dr Bryan Pickel (SSLC Convenor)

In attendance; Emma Nelson (Student Support Office)

Apologies: Dr Tillman Vierkant, Rachel Hughes (year 2 rep)

Meeting Chaired by Year 3 reps, Jose and Siena

1. Welcome from Y3 Reps

2. Previous events:

- a. Honours Philosophy Coffee and Cake – this event was not as well attended as the reps would have liked, but they did get some good feedback at the event.
- b. Honours Highlands Trip – Year 3 rep Jose attended this and found it to be a very positive experience.
- c. PPLS Lunch – overall this was a good event, however it would be good if there was a way of facilitating more intermingling between subject areas and level of study.

3. Actions from previous meeting:

- a. Student Support to check access to PhilosophyFeedback@ed.ac.uk generic email and re-send relevant guidance regarding access to this email address to Student Representatives – **complete.**
- b. Bryan Pickel to see if non-PPLS Philosophy joint honours students can be included in the PPLS newsletter mailing list – **complete.**
- c. Bryan Pickel to talk to the Topics in Mind and Cognition Course Organiser and remind the faculty more generally to be mindful that exchange students taking Philosophy courses will not have taken Edinburgh pre-honours Philosophy courses – **complete. Course Organiser also addressed this by providing additional background reading.**
- d. Bryan Pickel to give further consideration to how exchange students are allocated to Philosophy courses and whether this can be improved – **ongoing. There should be a lower concentration of exchange students in Philosophy courses next year as year 4 courses are opened up to them.**
- e. Bryan Pickel will talk with the Course Organizer for Late Modern Philosophy – **complete. Course Organiser had a good pedagogical reason for this. Students with good reason to miss class should contact the Course Organiser ahead of time. Students can arrange for a recording of the lecture for personal use as per the mainstream adjustments in the University's Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy.**
- f. Bryan Pickel to start a discussion in Philosophy about producing a policy that strongly encourages the provision of some form of summary – **ongoing as there can be good pedagogical reasons for not providing notes.**

- g. Bryan Pickel to reiterate to staff that they should wear a microphone wherever possible when lecturing – **complete.**
- h. Bryan Pickel to talk to Aidan McGlynn to ensure that announcements on the Philosophy Dissertation Preparation Course learn page are being sent as an email – **complete.**
- i. Filipa Melo Lopes to discuss the raised Morality and Value tutorial concerns this with the course's teaching team – **complete. Tutors have been reminded that their tutorial must have a connection to the tutorial exercises.**
- j. Bryan Pickel to raise the idea of a welcome back for students returning from year abroad with Damian Caluori and Aidan McGlynn – **complete. Hosting a welcome back meeting has been added to the remit of the Exchange Co-ordinator.**
- k. Bryan Pickel to talk to Philosophy of David Lewis Course Organiser to see if further guidance can be produced to clarify the expectations of short assignments – **complete and guidance will be provided.**
- l. Teaching Office to investigate reports of year 2 students receiving learn emails from Morality and Value learn page - **complete. This was because the students in question were enrolled on the learn page in their capacity as PhilPALs leaders.**
- m. Bryan Pickel to relay this request to staff - for lecturers to repeat audience questions to ensure everyone has heard it – **complete.**

4. TPR Discussion

- a. The timing of the Morality and Value mid-term essay was discussed. Students feel that there is not enough time between teaching of all of the possible essay topics and the essay deadline. Students were not put at a disadvantage because of this as they can write their essay on a topic covered earlier in the course. If the deadline were pushed, then it would be hard to get feedback to students ahead of the final take-home test. There is the possibility of removing the essay question on the topic covered closest to the deadline, but there have been previous complaints about restricting essay topics.
- b. The idea of opening the PPLS Writing Centre to first year students was supported by the reps. BP clarified that it would be very difficult to achieve this given student numbers, but that the Writing Centre is providing workshops aimed at year 1 Philosophy students. PhilSkills have also had activities targeted at first years to help them with writing essays. It might be possible to link this with PhilPALs to provide another source of support. **ACTION: BP to investigate linking PhilSkills more explicitly with the activity of PhilPALs.**
- c. Overall, the TPR was very positive with useful recommendations that Philosophy are trying to implement.

5. Departmental Guidance Notes

- a. These can be found in the Handbooks and course guides section of the Philosophy websites. If reps feel there is anything missing then they should contact BP.
- b. The reps think it's well organised and useful.
- c. Thanks to Ani in the Teaching Office for her help with this.

6. Request for Feedback on Philosophy Skills Workshop

- a. Overall positive feedback.
- b. Some students feel that the workshops were too broad and that they would like more specific and/or individual guidance about essay writing e.g. how many examples to use. GF clarified that this had been purposeful – he wants to remove the notion that there are prescriptive rules about how to structure an essay.
- c. Students are worried about accidental plagiarism and would like guidance on how to

reference correctly. BP pointed out there is guidance available in the handbooks and course guides section of the Philosophy website.

- d. It was suggested an opportunity for formative assessment of year 1 be arranged. Staff explained that students rarely actually take-up the offer for formative assessments and that the number of students enrolled in pre-honours courses means this would be very challenging for marking.
- e. BP explained that there is experimentation happening in the course Knowledge and Reality with 5% of the overall mark for the course derived from short assignments. This includes filling out an essay outline. One of the challenges with this is timing this so that students have completed enough of the course to complete an essay outline, and to allow feedback to be given in good time before their mid-term. **ACTION: Include feedback on the Knowledge and Reality short assignments on the agenda for the final SSLC meeting of semester 2.** Generally, the reps agreed that students like smaller assignments that are ongoing throughout the semester.
- f. Philosophy is considering increasing the number of tutorials offered at pre-honours level to incorporate more dedicated time for essays and other skills. This would be a large project and is being investigated for future years.
- g. There was a discussion about why first year students are stressed about their grades, given that they will not count towards their degree classification. The student reps clarified that there were lots of reasons for this: graduate programmes in other countries will consider these grades for applicants, they count towards applications for exchange years, and students may come from School systems where grades look different and need time to adjust (e.g. students from the USA will see 70 a basic pass rather than a first class mark).

7. Year 1 report

- a. The year 1 feedback lunch went well with approximately 20 people attending.
- b. There was some feedback that students are not satisfied with the depth that tutorials go into. GF explained that mid-semester feedback was split on this issue with many students feeling that tutorials were either too in-depth or did not allow for enough depth. He clarified that the lectures and tutorials are considered a framework for independent learning where students can go to whatever depth they choose. The course is also designed to be accessible for students with no background in Philosophy.
- c. Some students feel that the examples used in year 1 lectures are unrealistic. GF explained that this was done on purpose as a way of filtering out anything distracting. **ACTION: GF to share rationale for unrealistic examples.**
- d. There was positive feedback about Philosophy of Science 1. However, some students feel that there has been inconsistency in tutorials.
- e. Students feel that there are not enough destinations available for year abroad. BP explained that there are very few Philosophy specific exchanges, but that Philosophy students can also go on general exchanges organised by the University. This means there are more destinations available through Edinburgh Global and Erasmus.
- f. Students feel that the curriculum is too euro-centric. There is work being done on this with new honours courses offering options to study Chinese and African philosophy. Philosophy is also encouraging applicants with backgrounds in non-Western Philosophy to apply for future roles.

8. Year 2 report

- a. Some students feel that tutorials are too short. This may be addressed by adding additional tutorials, which is being investigated as an option. However, it would not be

an option to move to 2 hour tutorials. Students are also encouraged to make use of autonomous learning groups.

- b. Students feel that Mind, Matter and Language is too abstract and that the course hasn't been cohesive – it has been in two distinct parts. WS explained that the course is purposefully abstract as this type of thinking is part of studying Philosophy. However, work could be done to make the course more cohesive. The course has gone from having multiple lecturers to having two, so this should result in an improvement in cohesion within the course.
- c. Students wonder whether holding Language Labs would be useful in covering Philosophy of Language in Mind, Matter and Language. Staff want to move away from Logic style teaching for this topic and encourage students to make use of the writing support available (e.g. through the PPLS Writing Centre).

9. Year 3 report

- a. Students would like exemplar honours essays to help them, for example, understand the difference between a 65 and a 70. Students also find that their marks often drop between the end of year 2 and year 3. The Writing Centre has a bank of essays, but students should be aware that this likely won't cover the breadth of topics taught in honours Philosophy. Similarly, students should also bear in mind that the content of courses can change from year to year. Philosophy is also trying to be more robust with formative feedback at honours level.
- b. Students taking courses with a final take-home test are worried that that timing of this means that they will not get a revision week, unlike peers with a final exam. BP clarified that take-home exams are different from final exams and are marked to reflect this difference. **ACTION: BP to check with Exam Board Chair that assessment dates for take-home tests are correct.**
- c. Students taking the course Topics in Mind and Cognition have struggled with their mid-term essay that had a main question with five sub-questions. They felt it was hard to cover all of these within the word limit of 1500 words. BP explained that this was likely to help with structure. Students on this course liked the detailed feedback they received.
- d. Students felt the mid-term feedback for the course Aesthetics was not detailed enough.
- e. There was positive feedback about the course Metaphysics.
- f. Overall, there was positive feedback from third year students. However, students still struggle with feeling part of the Philosophy community. There is ongoing work about this with Philosophy organising various events, including lunches.

10. Year 4 report

- a. Students would like more in-depth essay feedback. Students liked the audio feedback given by David Levy for assessment in his course.
- b. There was a request for more support for students on joint honours programmes, as they are often confused about where they belong. BP explained that there is ongoing work in this area and that the Joint Honours Co-ordinator is producing guidance. Philosophy aims to publish this towards the end of the semester. Philosophy has also hosted lunches for joint honours students. **ACTION: BP to check on the status of the Philosophy and Theology lunch.**
- c. Handbooks were not published on time for course selection, BP clarified that this was a one-off problem - new Course Organisers were hired too late to produce this on time.
- d. There was a request from students for staff to keep their online profiles on the

University website up-to-date as they use this during course selection to help inform their choices.

- e. Students doing dissertations feel isolated and would like there to be opportunities to meet in person. Students are being organised into groups for meetings. There has been a delay with organising this for students undertaking coursework dissertations, but this is happening.
- f. Students feel there isn't enough study space. BP referred reps to the recent TPR report for information about this.
- g. There was positive feedback about courses with smaller, shorter assignments.
- h. Students taking Late Modern Philosophy feel that the books are very expensive and wonder if Philosophy can do something to facilitate second hand books, or can suggest cheaper sources. **ACTION:** BP to discuss the availability of books in the Late Modern Course with the course organiser.

11. BP thanked Siena and Jose for chairing the meeting. The year 4 reps, Eilidh and Rebecca, will chair the next meeting. The meeting closed at 1.30pm.

12. Action Points

- a. BP to investigate linking PhilSkills workshops more explicitly with the activity of PhilPALS.
- b. Include feedback on the Knowledge and Reality short assignments on the agenda for the final SSLC meeting of semester 2.
- c. GF to share rationale for unrealistic lecture examples in Morality and Value.
- d. BP to check with the Exam Board Chair that assessment dates for honours take-home tests are correct.
- e. BP to check on the status of the Philosophy and Theology joint honours lunch.
- f. BP to discuss the availability of books in the Late Modern Course with the course organiser.