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AN OVERVIEW OF THE EFFECT OF RESTRUCTURING IN SBCS ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Paper prepared in response to an invitation by the principal.

Introduction

We begin this analysis of the impact of the restructuring plan in the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences (SBCS) on the Student Experience in this department by reiterating that we all fully support the objective of improving the research focus within the School.

However, given the number, quality and expertise of our colleagues presently at risk of redundancy by virtue of the recent faculty board decisions, we hereby advise senior management that the proposed restructuring in SBCS is unworkable and will have a devastating effect on research and, more immediately, on teaching within our School.

Our concerns about the negative impacts of the restructuring on research will appear elsewhere. Here we provide evidence for what the vast majority of staff in SBCS has repeatedly pointed out, i.e. that the present restructuring plan fails to deliver a high quality educational experience for our students. Steps have yet to be taken to address this major shortcoming.

This is the first year that students will be paying £9,000 fees and we have to be at the top of our game when they arrive in September if we are to meet that challenge; instead it is impossible to plan for teaching in the 2012/13 session.

STUDENTS WILL NO LONGER RECEIVE OUR MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITY – TIME

It is not a coincidence that many of the ‘at risk’ staff are the very ones that students turn to in time of need. Staff who give their time to students have less for their other activities! At risk at present are:

Both Senior Academic Tutors.

The Chair of the Extenuating Circumstances examination sub-board.

The Disability co-ordinator.

Add to this that the restructuring aims to remove some tutorials to free up time and the picture becomes very clear: The student experience will be one where students are denied the staff who are prepared to listen to them, and fewer face-to-face experiences than is presently the case.

Finally, there will be a devastating effect **upon the pastoral care of the advisees** of each academic at risk when they have to be reallocated to a new adviser. At the same time, the numbers of advisees will have to increase in the remaining advisorial groups from a current average of 21.9 to 26.02.

STUDENTS WILL NO LONGER RECEIVE A HIGH QUALITY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The planned restructuring will have an extremely negative impact on teaching both in terms of delivery and teaching quality, even if some of the academic staff are willing to be bought back for a considerable price.

SBCS has currently 32 programmes of study (22 BSc, 3 MSci, 6 MSc and 1 Science Foundation) with different number of students in each programme (between 1 and 258). The student experience will therefore be adversely affected at all levels and in all modes of teaching.

Colleagues at 'risk of redundancy':

Organise 27 of the 187 modules offered by SBCS (spread over the entire spectrum of BSc, MSc programmes we offer). The total includes **11 first year modules**.

They deliver:

463 of the 2070 Lectures (average load per person = 42.1)

460 of the 1884 Practical/workshop classes (average load per person = 41.8) and

251 of the 1241 Tutorials (average load per person = 22.8)

They also organise **3** residential field courses and teach in **2** others.

It therefore goes without saying that ALL students will therefore be affected by these changes.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE WILL BE ADVERSELY AFFECTED ON A WIDE RANGE OF PROGRAMMES OF STUDY

There are compulsory and optional modules on most programmes, while compulsory courses have to be taken by students in certain programmes, optional modules can be compulsory courses in other programmes. It follows that there are no optional *sensu stricto* courses in the school. We have obligations to teach our students material essential for their degrees that in significant areas we will not be able to meet.

If we first consider the 'Whole Organism Division', we find that there are 7 colleagues at risk who contribute a total of **324** lectures. This is on average of **46.3** lectures per lecturer. What could the College do faced with this deficit?

Option 1: The school could consider allocating the load of 324 lectures to the 1-3 TSs. Even ignoring **the specialised nature of some of these lectures**, this option would constitute an unworkable number of hours for the 3 projected posts.

Option 2: The school could allocate the 324 lectures to 1-3 TSs and the 9 remaining TRs. Our assessment indicates that **this would effectively double the teaching loads of TR staff** from their current average load of **28.7** lectures to **58.5** lectures.

Moreover because many of them will have to teach outside their area of expertise the student experience will suffer greatly.

If we further consider the Chemistry Division where 2 more colleagues are at risk, they contribute to teaching with 87 lectures (average load 43.5). Even if these lectures could be allocated to the remaining 4 TSs, ignoring any specialised topics, the remaining TSs will have to raise their current average load from 47.5 to a load of 69.3 – a teaching lecture load increase of 50%.

Furthermore the detrimental effect on lectures is further augmented when considering tutorials and practical/workshop classes taught by academics at risk. For instance, the 2 Chemistry colleagues contribute 139 hours to practical/workshop classes due to the nature of their teaching. The allocation of these hours to the TSs will raise their current average load of 76.3 hours to 111.1 hrs-an increase of 46% .

The special nature of the B990 BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES is a case to argue on its own. This is an externally accredited programme and as such must not be altered without permission from the external validation panel. There are 2 colleagues under threat who teach the entire physiology component. Without them and their expertise, this programme will be seriously at risk and unteachable. Moreover this programme attracts many of our most talented students and is one of the most popular subjects (current total of students across 3 years is 258).

The compulsory and optional modules will be affected in twelve programmes. Figures 1-3 summarize the percentage of affected modules in each of 12 programmes and throughout 3-4 years of study.

There is a greater impact in the first year across the various programmes where on average 40% of all compulsory courses and 52.8% of optional courses are seriously affected (Fig. 1-3). 6 programmes (Biochemistry, Biology, Biomedical Sciences, Medical Genetics, Genetics and Zoology) will be adversely affected with >50% of all compulsory modules in the first year (Figs. 2 & 3).

The percent of optional modules affected amounts to $\geq 50\%$ in programmes such as Medical Genetics, Genetics, Psychology (Fig. 1), and Zoology (Fig. 2).

The percent of all affected compulsory modules in the 2nd year decreases to 16.3% but the serious effect on optional modules remains high at 35.8%. The programmes Medical

Genetics (Fig. 1) and Chemistry with Biochemistry (Fig. 3) will have more than 50% of optional modules affected.

In the third (and 4th year) the effect is more variable depending on the type of programme. Zoology, for instance, would be the most affected programme in the third year amounting to 50% of compulsory modules (Fig. 2).

Destroying our flagship

Our analysis reveals that one of the most vulnerable programmes is B990 BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES, which is the flagship programme in SBCS. Not only does it recruit extremely well (258 students across 3 years) but because it attracts by far the highest number of our most talented students. Key to its continuing success is the fact that it is an externally accredited programme and as such must comply with stringent quality requirements. Nevertheless the current plan places both colleagues who teach the entire physiology component under threat. Without them and their expertise this programme will be placed at serious risk.

NEXT YEAR'S NSS IS ALSO PLACED AT RISK

In the SBCS, final year BSc students are offered the opportunity to carry out a research project in a lab of their choice. The process for allocation to a research lab considers applications by students in their second semester of their 2nd year of study and they are given the chance to be allocated to one of 5 choices.

We have so far received applications to do research projects with 28 SBCS academics from 180 students. 32 of these students (17.8%) have chosen as their first choice one of the colleagues at risk.

If we assume that colleagues at risk may not be cheaply bought back, the school would have to reallocate those 32 students among the TSs and TRs. At the same time, the data clearly show that some academics have attracted more than the usual load of 5 students. If one considers 180 students and only 24 academics the load of research project students will amount to 7.5 students per lab/academic.

It is likely that the department will consider reallocating these students at short notice to the remaining TSs and TRs, **but consider the effect on the NSS score** when these students and their colleagues fill out their forms next year. The affected students will at best, given limited resources (chemicals, equipment, etc) in the department and the College must consider health and safety issues (i.e. a crowded lab), be doing a project outside their main areas of interest; at worst they will be doing some sort of 'surrogate' project. What sort of a student experience will that be? and how will they and their friends score SBCS in 2013 when we are trying to recruit undergraduates charging Russell Group fees?

THE PhD STUDENT EXPERIENCE IS ALSO ADVERSELY AFFECTED

The impact on PhD students has not been taken seriously, and currently all colleagues at risk have a total of 10.5 PhD students in various stages of their postgraduate research. Some of them are funded by college grants (GTSs) while others are funded by CSC (Chinese Scholarship Council).

We have 2 PhDs which are not in the QMUL books because these students are registered overseas in a university where our colleague is recognised as an Extraordinary Professor. These students do depend strongly on him and his unique lab facilities to complete their research. The College must take into account not only the impact on their research progress but also on their welfare.

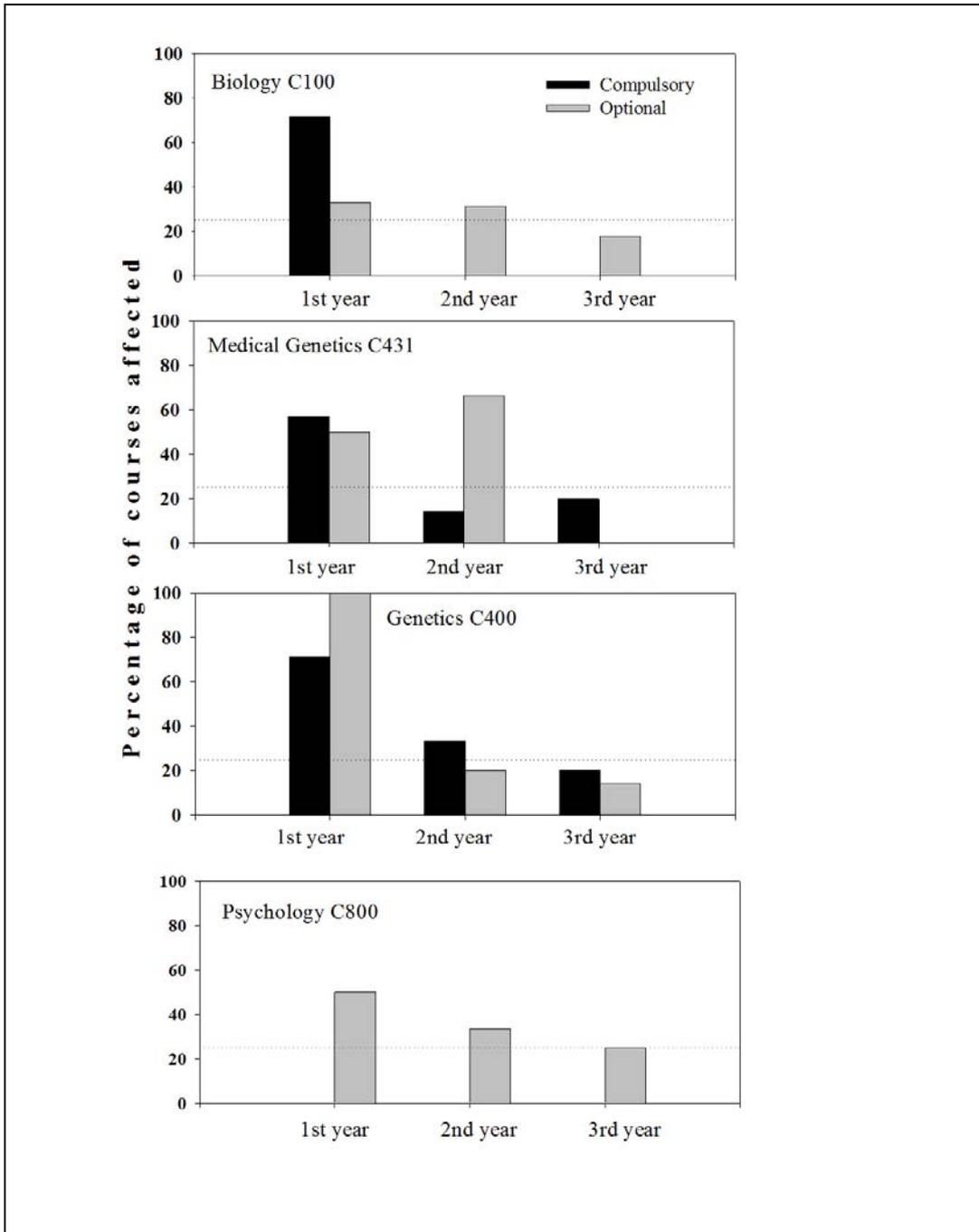


Fig. 1. The percentage of modules affected per study programme (Biology, Medical Genetics, Genetics and Psychology) and per year of study. Dotted line represents 25%.

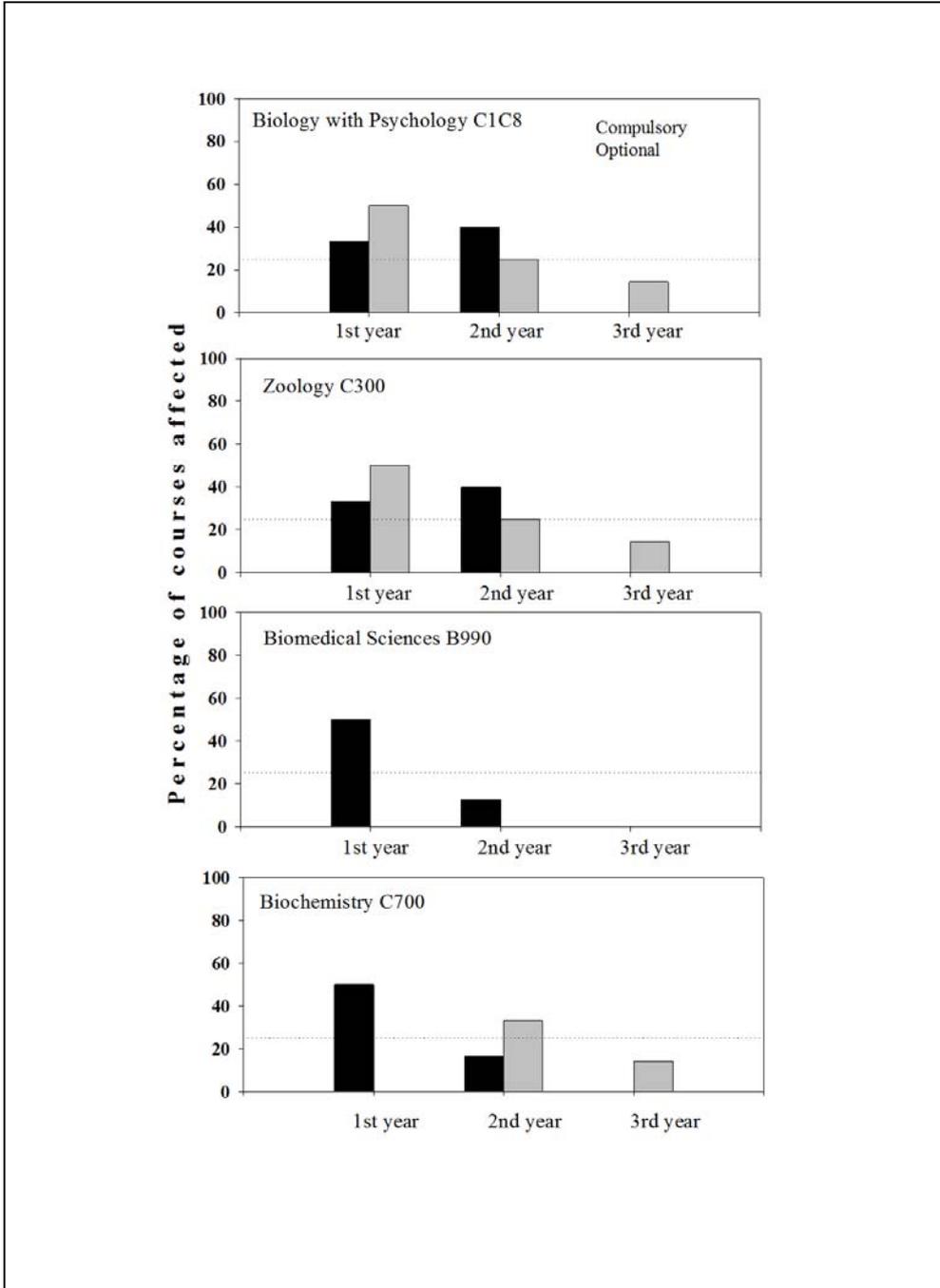


Fig. 2. The percentage of modules affected per study programme (Biology with Psychology, Zoology, Biomedical Sciences, and Biochemistry). Dotted line represents 25%.

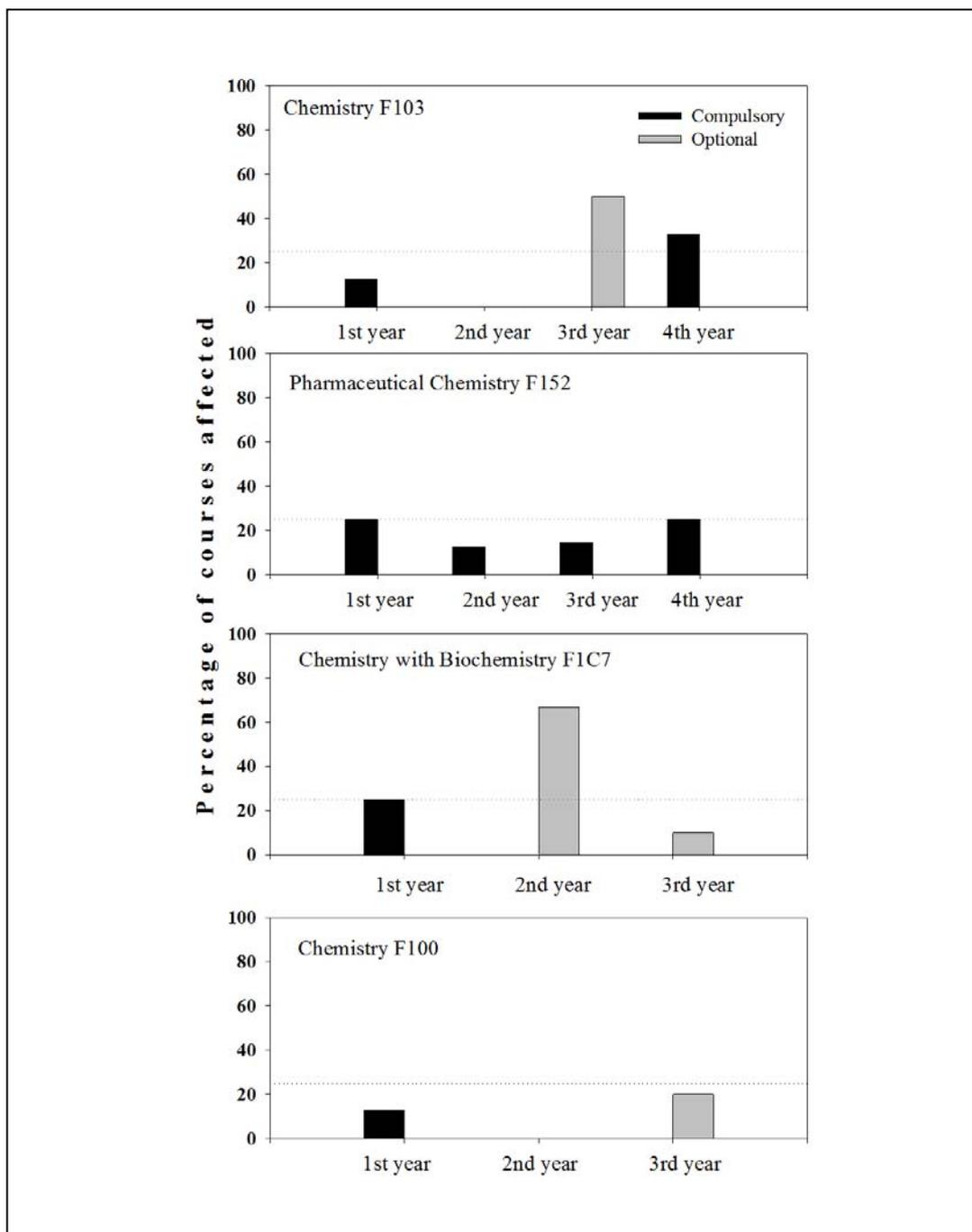


Fig. 3. The percentage of modules affected per study programme and per year of study. Dotted line represents 25%.

CONCLUSION

It is fair to conclude that the impact of the restructuring on the student experience has not been subjected to a proper risk assessment. Therefore we deem it unacceptable and irresponsible.

Furthermore the risk to research has been grossly under-rated:

If this plan goes ahead the indirect support that the “at risk” staff makes through their heavy teaching loads to the research output of the School will be lost or severely reduced. Such an outcome will have a detrimental effect on research output because TR staff will have to devote more time to teaching. In the organismal division, which is arguably the strongest hit that would equate to an effective doubling of teaching loads.

The present paper has explained why this plan will compromise the Student Experience and is unworkable in terms of both Teaching and Research. We welcome any scrutiny and/or debate of our assessment.

Source of data:

In this brief analysis of impact assessment on teaching we have used the current (2011/12) SBCS academic teaching load available from the school’s website. The assessment considered 10 (of the 11) colleagues at risk of redundancy and 1 colleague with an offered TS contract but not willing to sign up. We have considered a sample size of 12 BSc and MSc programmes that comprised 1117 students from a total of 1279 (87.3% of all students).

Final note: Time is short

Even as we write colleagues are applying for jobs elsewhere, one is leaving another is considering an offer and others have been interviewed. These are good researchers that are taking their expertise and REF contributions with them. Second year students have no idea who to choose for their final year projects because nobody knows who will have left by September, and planning for field courses in summer for next year’s courses can only proceed if we know who will still be here to deliver the lectures for these modules. Last year one member of staff was hospitalised for a few weeks at the beginning of term and it created havoc for the staff and students. Even if 90% of SBCS staff remains in some guise in the short term, the missing 10% constituting 6-7 individuals will have a catastrophic effect on our delivery of teaching and more especially on our ability to look after the students in 2012/13. And all of this in the very year that our recruitment is up 50% in C100 Biology and the students are paying fees.

We regret the reputation damage already inflicted on the department and the corresponding drop in morale. However, there is still time to avert disaster: we urgently need to meet together to agree a new and workable plan to achieve the laudable goals to which the College aspires.