

Update on proposal to zero-weight first year undergraduate Biology courses
Jonathan Silver, ICU Deputy President (Education)

1. At ICU Council on the 16th of November 2009, the Deputy President (Education) presented the following proposal for discussion:

The current year weighting for Biology stream three years degrees for the calculation of the final mark for consideration for honours is 0.5 : 3.0 : 6.5. Four year placement degrees are the same, the year out being zero weighted in the calculation but the year must still be passed, and the mark appears on transcripts.

The proposal is to change the weighting to 0 : 3.5 : 6.5 effective for the new cohort arriving October 2010.

A similar change will be made for Biology with Management to take the weighting for the three year degree from 0.5 : 2.5 : 2.0 to 0 : 3.0 : 2.0 and the four year degree from 0.5 : 2.5 : 3.5 : 3.5 to 0 : 2.5 : 4.0 : 3.5. An equivalent change will apply to Biology with management and a Year in Industry (5 year course).

Advantages of the change include a greater emphasis on final year marks (escape velocity) in calculation of marks for honours, reducing the requirement for double marking in first-year exams, and improving the prospects for rapid and effective feedback since scripts will no longer need to be quarantined to await possible external examiner scrutiny in year three. Scripts will not be returned to students but can be used by personal tutors to provide better quality feedback.

Possible disadvantages are mainly that students may decide to soft-pedal the year since it no longer counts in the long term. However the year still needs to be passed and most students will take the precaution of striving for a large margin of error on the upside of the passmark. Also, marks will still appear on a student's transcript and thereby might influence a person's career prospects, potential for postgraduate bursaries etc.

The proposal has been approved by the Biology teaching committee who felt that the disadvantages of zero weighting were minor and had been exaggerated in the past. The change would take us into territory already occupied by most UK universities, including our major competitors.

2. Council voted to show their position on the proposal, with the following results:
- a. 0 for
 - b. 20 against
 - c. 3 abstentions
3. The Deputy President (Education) presented Council's points to Professor Denis Wright, Dean of Students, ex-Director of Undergraduate Studies in Life Sciences and ex-Principal of the (then) Faculty of Life Sciences.
4. The following table summarises the points made by Council, and Professor Wright's response to each:

<u>ICU Council</u>	<u>Professor Denis Wright, Dean of Students</u>
<i>It was believed that the advantages of zero-weighting were not significant, particularly as scripts still could not be returned to students.</i>	It depends if the proportion of 2.1's and 1 st 's increasing slightly is not thought to be significant. This would occur every year in Biology as the average mark in year 1 is always significantly below that in Years 2 and Year 3. Even if only a handful of students benefitted p.a. it would be significant for them.
<i>Many students flatly stated that they would not take their first year as seriously, and did not expect others to.</i>	Not passing both the exam and the coursework components for all modules (introduced in Biology from 2008-09) in order to progress seems a pretty big incentive to me. If some students don't take that seriously and thus fail then they probably won't do very well in any walk of life.
<i>It was believed that this was</i>	Double marking would still take place where a fail mark was

<i>mainly an attempt by academic staff to reduce their own workload.</i>	given in an exam. First year coursework is not double marked anyway – although the convenor of a module will check that marks awarded appear consistent and such a system would remain. Most academic staff work very long hours and any saving in double-marking time would leave more time for other things, including feedback.
<i>It was believed that the fact that the first year has a weighting sets Imperial apart from lesser institutions in a favourable way.</i>	I am interested that Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and LSE, for example, are lesser institutions; the ‘favourable way’ would not include awarding rather less 2.1s and 1 st than other institutions (see top bullet)?
<i>It was feared that allowing one department to make this change would lead the way for several others to do the same.</i>	This assumes that this is a bad thing (see above) which I and others do not – and this is for other Departments to decide individually.
<i>Some members showed surprise that the current first year weighting is already as low as 1:6:13.</i>	This has been the case for Biology and Biochemistry for about 10 years, when it was reduced from 10% to 5%. During the intervening years, the % of 1 st class degrees in particular has increased substantially. While other measures put in place have also contributed, not being dragged down by a relatively poor Year 1 performance has been one factor. Many students who do relatively poorly in Year 1 do so not because they are lazy but because they need time to adjust and develop to studying more independently at University and to the level of the subject. I am sure this also applies to many other subjects apart from Biology. A major problem for us is that prior to University many students have not had much practice at writing essay, lab reports and exam answers in an integrative, analytical way and this can take some more time to acquire than others.
	This is all clearly informed by my personal experience and views but that does encompass some 35 cohorts of graduating Biology students since the early 1970s and my experience at Director of Studies for over 12 years to 2008.

5. Professor Wright also made the following general comments:

All other UK Universities zero Year 1 and the Biology External Examiners (from a wide range of Universities inc. Cambridge, Oxford, York, Bath, Bristol, Leeds, Birmingham....) have consistently recommended that we should do so for many years
It doesn't affect student work rate/progression at other Russell Group Universities, inc. Cambridge, Oxford, UCL, Warwick etc., so why should it here?
It would be introduced from the October 2010 entry cohort so no current Biology student would be affected (I suspect many would like it to be – see the fifth point below)
We would be able to give better exam feedback from Year 1 as exam papers that do not contribute to the degree can be shown more readily to students; overall it would help feedback in the most formative UG year
Statistically, Biology (and many other) students progress - attaining higher marks in their later years than in Year 1; if Year 1 did not count there would be a small increase in the proportion of 1sts and 2.1s awarded; Biology Year 1 only counts 5% - in other degrees, where it counts 10% or more, this effect would be greater.

6. The Deputy President (Education) requests Council to take this response into account, and re-evaluate the initial proposal given the new information.