

# DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

## STAFF-STUDENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 20 April 2005, 1pm  
Midwifery Building, BLG 5

### Minutes

Present: Lyndon Morant (chair), Heather Arnold, George Botterill, Anne-Marie Cox, Edward Grefenstette, David Muhl-Richardson, Gareth Rose, Sally Smith, Robert Stern, Matt Thomas, Leif Wenar. Apologies were received from Tim Fiennes and Andrew Howat.

#### 1. Examination format.

The Chair noted that many students fail to see the point of pre-releasing examinations, which merely encourages students to write essays at home, memorize them, and then reproduce them in the exam. This seems merely to test students' skill at memorizing and reproducing, rather than their knowledge of the material or ability to think philosophically. Of course, writing the exam answers at home tests philosophical skills, but that would be better achieved with coursework essays. The Chair proposed that the Department reconsider its policy.

Members of staff pointed out that it was not Department policy that all exams be pre-released; the decision to pre-release exams was left up to individual lecturers, and some use unseen exams. It was also noted that there were benefits to pre-releasing exams. It made students more likely to write answers directed at the question, whereas unseen exams encourage students to 'dump' whatever they know about the topic, owing to time pressures. There were fewer disastrous performances with pre-released exams, because no one is unprepared. It was also noted that those lecturers who give unseen exams typically tell the students what topics will appear, so that the boundary between 'seen' and 'unseen' is hazy. Also, most students seem to prefer exams to be pre-released. There was considerable support for a mix of pre-released and unseen exams across modules, which is consistent with the current policy.

It was agreed that the Department should make the rationale for pre-released exams public, either in individual course booklets or on the website. It was also agreed that lecturers might consider asking their students which form of assessment they would prefer.

#### 2. Third-year modules

Concern was expressed about the narrow range of topics in third-year modules: couldn't there be more Continental or Eastern philosophy on offer? It emerged that the new schedule for next year includes a course on Sartrean existentialism, as well as familiar courses on Kant, Hegel, and phenomenology. It was also noted that Yonatan Shemmer had discussed Mencius in his Political Philosophy course (but that there were no books in the library on Mencius). Bob Stern said that a course on Eastern philosophy put on by the School of East Asian Studies in the past had been disappointing for philosophy students. While recognizing that expertise in non-Western philosophy is in short supply, the students encouraged staff to make some mention of non-Western philosophy in their courses.

#### 3. Module registration.

There was concern that people whose busy schedules prevented them from getting to

module registration on Wednesday afternoon, resulting in their being excluded from popular courses. It was pointed out that such students could send a friend to register for them, and that special arrangement could be made if this was impossible.

There was also concern that there might be arguments about who is first in the queue at registration. Should numbered tickets be given out? Veterans assured the students that this had not been a problem in the past.

It was noted that History have a system where students can register for modules via the internet. The Department agreed to see how this works, and to consider doing something similar if it works well.

#### **4. Seminars.**

Although it is hard to get students to agree about how seminars should be run (e.g. large-group discussion or splitting into small groups), it was felt that some lecturers could be more flexible about this and ask the students what they prefer. It was also proposed that there be handouts at seminars so that students had something on paper about what went on. It was especially useful for students giving presentations to provide handouts. It was agreed on all sides that students' seminar presentations were often half-hearted, and that lecturers often fail to provide useful feedback to presenters on how it went. Eric Olson agreed to remind lecturers to give useful feedback.

#### **5. Essay deadlines**

One student wondered why an essay for a first-year course came at the beginning of Writing Week rather than at the end. Didn't that defeat the purpose of having a week without teaching? George Botterill replied that this was a deliberate decision on the part of the lecturer, probably in order to avoid having two or three first-year essays due at the same time. Most students would have other essays due at the end of Writing Week, and could use the time to complete that work.