

ENABLING CROSS DISCIPLINARY UNITS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

The University has long had a commitment to an 'open unit' strategy, which enables students to select for themselves topic(s) they wish to pursue outside of their primary programme of study, and there is no proposal to alter this.

In April 2011 the Working Group of Undergraduate Deans last recommended a number of revisions to the section on 'student choice' in the *Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes* and additionally:

- A definition of the term 'open unit', as being a unit that is outside of the student's subject discipline which any student can take (i.e. not have any pre- or co-requisites), subject to space and timetabling constraints, be added to the Code.
- Programme teams be invited to review their programme structures and consider the ways in which the student's undergraduate education could be broadened by way of both optional and open units as part of the approved programme of study.
- Schools and unit directors be invited to review their open unit provision and decide which units should be offered as 'open units' in the new model.

More recently, the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education has identified a growing trend within the University for academic staff to explore cross-disciplinary or thematic units. UNIV 10001, the award-winning Sustainable Development unit, was the first, but since then a number have been developed/ are being developed offering institutional or Faculty level units. That growing experience has shown both the value of these units, but also that those seeking to establish such units face a number of administrative and other obstacles.

There is no lack of ideas emerging from academics, for example:

- The Science Faculty 'Big Ideas in Science' unit
- Quantitative Methods for Social Sciences developed by a team led by Richard Harris the second University unit, with the code UNIV10002
- Project Arts is developing Faculty wide thematic initiatives

There are growing pressures to demonstrate student engagement with such issues as

- Education for Sustainable Development
- Enterprise /Entrepreneurship

Other institutions are developing in a similar manner, for example LSE100, which deals with big ideas in social sciences or the UCL Global Citizenship unit.

So, there is not a lack of ideas emerging from academics.

Earlier in the year UUSC considered these trends and concluded that the:

"best way to expand upon this was to encourage such initiatives and remove the logistic and organisational barriers, such finance, administrative support and timetabling."

This paper brings forward recommendations for doing so, including a definition of the units to which the recommended approach would apply.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. A number of innovative units have been established in recent years, which cross disciplinary, School or Faculty borders – as a result of individual or group initiatives. The University welcomes and encourages such initiatives as a means of offering a

richer curriculum to students within the formal part of their University experience. Examples include the 'Big Ideas in Science', 'Sustainable Development' and 'Quantitative Analysis for Social Sciences'.

1.2. The units that have been established are firmly grounded in the academic and research interests of the academics who have led the development. We have considered whether we can or should establish a suite of University initiatives, but have concluded that the success of these units depends upon the commitment and intellectual initiative of individuals or groups or academics.

1.3. However, a number of barriers, financial, administrative and timetabling for those seeking to develop further units in this manner.

2. 'Cross disciplinary Units'

2.1. An 'open unit' is defined as being a unit that is outside of the student's subject discipline which any student can take (i.e. not have any pre- or co-requisites), subject to space and timetabling constraints. 'Open units' refers to the student's relationship to the unit – a specific unit can be a mandatory unit for one student, an optional unit for another and an open unit for someone else i.e. 'open' is an identifier of the relationship of the unit to the individual student. Where such units are part of a programme of study as mandatory or optional units for at least some students, the governance of such units is managed through normal programme management structures.

2.2. A 'cross disciplinary unit' is a unit of study that does not have that same programme mapping and governance route, for one of two reasons. It refers to units not primarily provided for one particular cohort of students, but is available, recommended, or possibly even mandatory for a set of students, defined by Faculty or is available to all students, but is not primarily provided for students on one programme/ in one discipline. The distinction between cross disciplinary units, and open units in general is twofold:

(a) they are not primarily provided for the needs of one programme and therefore need specific provision in relation to governance which would ordinarily be provided via the programme to which a unit belongs;

(b) they may sometimes be an advised, optional or even mandatory part of several programmes but they sit outside of the programme governance of any one programme/ School.

So 'cross disciplinary' is a term used to identify the relationship of a unit to the programme governance structure in the University, rather than its relationship to an individual student.

2.3. For such units, the theme and learning outcomes are applicable to any student on any undergraduate programme across a Faculty (or the University) and reflect:

- issues that are currently pertinent in the education of students, which could aim to address generic academic issues that we would ideally like to imbue in our graduates but find it difficult to do so within the curriculum or which are underrepresented in the specific programme curricular offer;
- issues that are currently pertinent and topically relevant for society in general.

2.4. The suite of cross disciplinary units will change from time to time depending upon the on-going relevance of the topic, alternative ways of providing the experience (e.g. embedding in primary programmes), the emergence of new initiatives or needs and of course student interest.

- 2.5. The unit will not normally have any pre-requisites and therefore will normally be at level 4 or 5. Cross-disciplinary units are inclusive in that the unit should be exclusively a cross- disciplinary unit and not listed as a dedicated optional unit for any single discipline.
- 2.6. For programmes where there is space in the curriculum, students will be able to undertake the unit for credit that counts towards their programme of study.
- 2.7. Thematic units may be taught collaboratively across disciplines or derived from and taught within one existing school/subject. Such units may also include 'guest lectures' from experts in the field who are external to the University. All new thematic units should be proposed and agreed by the contributing faculties and approved through the normal programme approval process.
- 2.8. These units differ from units delivered within a programme which are also offered as open units – they do not have the same core business.

3. Practical barriers

- 3.1. A number of practical and procedural issues currently dog the development of such initiatives:
 - How funding is delivered.
 - Establishing where the responsibility for administration and the quality assurance of the unit lies.
 - How such units are recorded and managed on central record systems.
 - At which point in the timetable such units are scheduled to ensure availability.

4. Financial

- 4.1. At present, whilst such units attract FTE student numbers, the budgetary model adopted by the University attributes funding for FTE student numbers according to Schools. The FIS does not make it easy for Schools to identify the impact of such numbers on their funding. The Teaching Income line of the School FIS is driven by the actual student load, so that the 'host' School for a unit does receive additional credit, for all FTEs registered on the unit (and a corresponding change is made in budgets for the School from which such students come). However it also has an impact upon the attributed costs, as these are in part driven by student FTEs. As a result it is difficult for Schools to see the credit they receive for hosting such units. This directly affects the provision of non salary spend on the unit. It depends fundamentally on requiring every unit to be attached to a host School for financial purposes.
- 4.2. There is no workload model (or associated funding model) for staff time, associated with such units. In a number of such units the teaching is spread across many staff, with individual additional workloads being sufficiently small to be absorbed by the keen and committed first cohort of staff who initiates the unit. Workload issues become more complex when the unit moves beyond that initial goodwill commitment, or where the burden falls on a small number of staff. If their home School includes it in their workload plan, the School is bearing the salary cost of the unit, and if the home School does not then the person is teaching an additional load.

5. Administration and QA

- 5.1. At present, the administrative support to units and their Quality Assurance is delivered via Schools. So, the process of appointing externals, setting examination papers, carrying out the moderation process and then APR processes are all conducted via the School. This works for units that are offered as an integral part of a School's

programme, but does not fit entirely comfortably with units offered at Faculty or University level.

6. Student records

- 6.1. There is a question about how such units are recorded and managed on central record systems, and how students taking such units are recorded, insofar as they are not being taken for credit points towards a programme but are being 'audited'.
- 6.2. Irrespective of how such units are managed financially and administratively behind the scenes, we need to ensure units are able to be coded in a manner appropriate to the academic drivers of the unit, so that UNIV or Faculty e.g. SCI codes should be permitted, to send appropriate academic signals, whatever the underlying governance and funding model is.
- 6.3. Currently our system is focussed upon recording units for which a student is registered, will be assessed and receive credit points towards their degree. If in the future we recognise the notion of 'auditing' units, we will need the capacity to record units being audited (even if this is rarely available at present, the capacity to do so is needed) and to distinguish those from formal parts of the credit point load contributing to the degree.

7. Timetabling

- 7.1. The issues here are more operational than conceptual.
- 7.2. At which point in the timetable such units are scheduled affects their availability – are they to be scheduled alongside compulsory units, given a dedicated slot or left until later in the process.
- 7.3. Predicting student numbers and mapping them onto the mode of delivery may be difficult, unless a global maximum is imposed for each unit.
- 7.4. 'Auditing' would place additional pressures on timetabling.

8. Options for governance

- 8.1. There are three broad options for improving the support to such units:
 - attachment to a single School and treated as an integral part of that School's provision
 - cross Faculty units are attached to the Faculty
 - units whose cross disciplinary reach makes a single School host inappropriate be owned by an independent central Unit.
- 8.2. The latter has attractions, and would facilitate the development of a suite of units, including study skills etc. which are institutionally owned. However, there is currently no obvious unit to lead on this, unless arrangements are made to re-configure and appropriately resource the Education Support Unit, including the provision of an academic lead. As a 'University Institute of Education' it could oversee such programmes, but this is not currently part of the University's structure.
- 8.3. The former runs the risk of Schools being reluctant to support intellectual initiatives which are not of direct and substantial relevance to their own programmes. If there is a strong pedagogic lead from the PVC this can be addressed on a case by case basis.

8.4. Faculty ownership may well reflect the right level intellectually, but will require specific provision for both funding and quality assurance.

9. Recommendations

9.1. All units, whether offered within one programme, or offered across a Faculty, or the institution are expressly attached to either a School, Faculty or are Institutionally owned. That the latter approach be delivered via an 'adopted' School until such time as there is an appropriate Institutional vehicle for them.

9.2. That all three levels of ownership are recognised and accepted, but that if ownership is not at School level, at the point at which a unit is established, governance arrangements dealing with the issues below are spelt out.

9.3. That the position below is the default position, until alternative arrangements designed to facilitate the delivery of a high quality unit can be agreed.

9.4. Finance

9.4.1. For financial purposes, the Unit must be attached to its home School or, in the case of a Faculty or University Unit, to a nominated School, determined at the point at which the unit is established.

9.4.2. Workload recommendations

- That the teaching and assessment of the unit be included in the workload model for all staff teaching on the unit according to the workload model used in that person's home School, and that the unit convenor is given whatever workload credit their home School would provide for convening the unit.
- That no financial transfer is made between Schools associated with teaching on the units beyond that within the inherent funding model.
- That staff who have workload model credit are not paid, but that people teaching on the unit who do not receive workload credit e.g. research staff, hourly paid staff or visiting fellows, are paid a fee for preparation and teaching in the normal manner for fee payment.

9.4.3. That means the units will only have a non salary cost and a limited fee cost. Modelling of a sample current open unit indicates that the normal funding approach will more than cover the costs. Calculation of the actual figure for each such unit each year is not straightforward, so we recommend an indicative figure of £X per FTE is used, based on a sample calculation carried out by the University Finance Office annually. This money to be held by the host School as an earmarked fund to meet the teaching, non salary, administrative and resource requirements of the unit.

9.4.4. In the first year of such a thematic unit, a small fund will be needed to cover costs, before actual numbers will be available. The provision of such an educational initiatives small grants fund is something that is being discussed elsewhere as part of a wider consideration of how we encourage pedagogic development, pending such developments; we recommend the default provision is that the host School absorbs the cost and deducts that from subsequent year's attributed income.

9.4.5. We have some doubts that this model will deliver more thematic units but is the best available as a default position unless discussions about 'top slicing' arising from SSL result in an alternative vehicle.

9.5. Administration and QA

- 9.5.1. That ESU develops a specific quality assurance process for units that do not readily fit our programme/ School based APR structure.
- 9.5.2. That where a unit is attached to a School:
- they are included within the host School APR processes and FQET visit
 - the host School ensures at least one of their External Examiners can provide oversight to the programme's assessment process
 - all administration for the unit is provided via the Undergraduate Student Administrator in the host School or by agreement by another person – in the latter case the person will be funded by the School from within the earmarked fund
 - that these marginal costs be absorbed by the host school
 - where the unit is a Faculty Unit or there are other reasons for concluding it does not fit the School APR model, the Unit QA process is applied.

9.6. Central Records

- 9.6.1. The Unit code should reflect the academic positioning of the unit, and should behind the scenes be mapped onto the appropriate financial and other unit.
- 9.6.2. We recommend that as part of the E-Vision project, consideration is given to a recording process is developed for students who are auditing a unit for which they will not be assessed and for which they will not be awarded credit points, such unit to appear on transcripts as audited units, and to be subject to the normal attendance requirements, but to be recognised as such and not given weighting in timetabling mapping, subject to 9.8.

9.7. Timetabling

- 9.7.1. Given pressures on space, giving priority to these units in timetabling is not likely to be viable, so it is recommended that some 1-2 pm time slots be set aside for such units, in an appropriate teaching space, and that if they use lectures, the lecture space be allocated as part of the main lecture allocation.
- 9.7.2. Auditing Units

The question of whether to permit 'auditing' of units is outside of the scope of this paper. We are aware of intellectual arguments for, and against, widening availability of this practice. Whilst enabling students to extend their intellectual experience there are problems with participation in group work. We feel the benefits of a widened intellectual experience are best met through informal/co-curricular opportunities. We are in any event not in a position in terms of timetabling, finance, records and transcripts to commit to expansion of this practice and consider it unhelpful to make proposals for such expansion at this time.

Agreed by Education Committee, March 2013