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# School of Biology President's Report

2017-18, Semester 2

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## Introduction for Students and Staff

This report aims to summarise the main activities of the School of Biology class representatives and I throughout semester 1. It has been a productive semester centred around increasing communication and improving the way we gather and respond to student feedback within the school, themes which I hope we can carry on into the upcoming semester and beyond.

I hope this report is useful in giving the reader an indication of where we have been and where we have still to go. I have thoroughly enjoyed my first semester as President and am optimistic that the second semester will be just as rewarding.

Many thanks,

Erin Phillips



School of Biology President 2017-18

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## 1. SSCC Compositional Changes

At the request of staff and students and on the recommendation of last year's president the DoT and I decided to introduce the role of Integrated Masters Representative. The position went unfilled however, so it is unlikely that it will be carried on to next year.

While the school has always had one SSCC meeting per semester, upon discussion with other school presidents I have decided to trial having two meetings this coming semester to allow us to look back on our progress and reflect on changes we have made. If this is successful I will recommend to future presidents that it continue.

## 2. Elections

We had a successful election period with 20 candidates running for 9 positions. The position of first year representative was particularly well contested with 7 candidates running for 2 positions. The only unfilled position was that of Integrated Masters Rep, a new position for this year, likely due to the small class size. Accordingly, I will be recommending to next year's president that it be removed in future, as there does not seem to be a demand for it.

All class representatives have been very enthusiastic and have brought a lot of great ideas to the table.

## 3. SSCC

The school SSCC currently meets once a semester and is chaired by the School President, though I hope to increase these meetings to two a semester. Undergraduate Class Representatives, Year Coordinators, the Director and Deputy Director of Teaching and the Biology Society President attend. Students and staff discuss feedback both positive and negative and make decisions on how best to rectify any issues. Prior to SSCC the School President holds a Class Rep Forum where it is decided which issues will be brought forward to staff at these meetings and how more minor problems can be solved. Minutes of the SSCC held in S1 will be available on the School of Biology website and a summary of the issues discussed distributed to students.

## 4. Tutorial Review

As a result of feedback from students as well as discussions at SSCC, the DoT and I will be carrying out a review of the school tutorial system. At present first years have tutorials straight after labs aimed at improving a variety of skills including report writing and peer marking. These tutorials were introduced this year and feedback has been mixed.

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Second and third years have skills-based, non-assessed tutorials once a fortnight. These tutorials were introduced a number of years ago at the request of students but are poorly attended across the board.

During semester two we will be forming a number of focus groups in an attempt to understand what students would like to gain from these tutorials and how they can be improved. If these changes can be implemented, we hope attendance will increase and that students will find tutorials a valuable use of their time.

## 5. Communication

Improving communication within the school has been a key focus of mine this semester; between students, between staff and between students and staff.

### 5.1 Between students

I have encouraged the class reps to make use of social media to keep their classmates informed about what we have been working on. Each year group has a Facebook group moderated by the class reps and myself in which they can discuss practical aspects of modules such as lecture times and advertise biology-relevant events that others might be interested in. I have also ensured to create event pages on social media for each of the events run by myself or the school and these have been successful in drumming up interest among students who may not take particular note of emails advertising the same events.

I have also made an effort to encourage the school to make use of social media when advertising events and news and hope that this will be taken into account as we continue on to next semester.

### 5.2 Between staff

As a large school, in past years Biology has had some problems with deadline clashes between modules, causing stress among students. Some instances of this occurred this semester and in a few cases members of staff granted to move one deadline by a few days to reduce the overlap between assignments. We have also made an effort to encourage staff to inform students when their deadlines will fall as soon as possible so they can plan accordingly.

### 6.3 Between students and staff

I will be publishing the minutes of the S1 SSCC on the School Website for the first time and circulating a 'You said, we did' style summary to students.

The class reps and I have been searching for new ideas to improve the way in which we gather feedback from our classmates and this semester trialled a 'sticky notes system', successfully used by other schools, in which students are given three sticky notes in their lectures and asked to write down one thing they enjoy about that module, one thing they would like to see improve and one random thing. This was very successful and class reps were able to draw out key concerns shared by many of their colleagues which were then addressed with the module coordinator directly, or at SSCC. As fourth year students have less contact time and class sizes are small, we trialled fourth year

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specific surveys to gather feedback. Response rates were not as high as we had hoped but the feedback that we did receive was constructive. I have hopes that we can increase these response rates in the future by demonstrating that this feedback is taken into account and discussed with staff.

## 6. Careers

At the beginning of the semester we held the school's annual Internships Symposium. We had 6 fourth year students from disciplines across the school give short talks on internships they undertook over the summer, focussing on how they found, applied for and funded these opportunities. The event was fairly well attended with about 30 students present. We also provided drinks and snacks which went down well.

Last year the School introduced a Careers Day which takes place on the Monday of Careers Week in S2W2. This is a full day event that is compulsory for all 3<sup>rd</sup> years and involves presentations from guests and networking in the morning followed by a group mock interview session in the afternoon. Although the School President is not directly involved in the organisation of this event, I received feedback that many students last year felt that presentations were too long, leaving not enough time for networking, so ensured this was remedied in the plans for this year's event.

I have also provided student feedback to the Careers Centre on the kind of events Biology students would like to see and am currently advising on their organisation of science communication and wildlife filmmaking events taking place in week 2 of S2. I anticipate these events will be very well attended.

I am also currently in the process of organising an event centred around Senior Honours Projects in which 3<sup>rd</sup> years can seek advice on project selection from 4<sup>th</sup> years currently undertaking theirs, which I hope will take place in late February.

## 7. Open Days

At the request of the School this semester I put together small group of Biology students that attend Biology-specific events each open day and act as Ambassadors for the school. These students are available to provide a student perspective of Biology at St Andrews to visitors and walk them to and from different Biology locations across town. This has been well received by visitors and I hope this will continue once my successor takes over.

## 8. New Premises

This semester we were able to announce to students the very exciting news that the School of Biology has new premises within the university! Up to now the school has had no social 'hub' as lectures are held in buildings of other schools and staff are spread in offices across town. In

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December the new Biology Hive opened in the New Technology Centre in North Haugh offering a social area, tutorial rooms and study spaces exclusively for biology students. The Biology Teaching Office has also moved to the Hive.

In week 10 we held a Biology Student-Staff Christmas Party to launch the new space. This was a fantastic event that was extremely well attended by students and staff (and their families!) and the free mulled wine and mince pies went down a treat. We hope the Hive will be a great resource for students and staff in the upcoming semester and hope to incorporate it into visiting days to encourage new students to use it in the future.

## 9. Postgraduate Affairs

In the School of Biology PGT reps hold their own meetings with the PG Director of Teaching. Our MSc Marine Mammal Science Rep organised Blue Planet screenings for his classmates this semester (with free pizza) which were a great success, and our PGR rep is in the process of investigating the possibility of setting up a PGR journal club.

## 10. Teaching Committee

Teaching committee meets roughly twice a semester and discusses teaching specific issues within the school. I sit on the committee as a representative of the student body and to offer a student perspective on any change that might affect us.

## 11. Equality and Diversity Committee

I also sit on the school Equality and Diversity Committee which this semester has been focussed on preparing our application for an Athena Swan Silver Award. The application was submitted in November and we expect to hear back in semester 2.

## 12. Education Committee, Working Groups and School Presidents' Forum

### 13.1 Education Committee

Education Committee meets almost every week and includes all of the School Presidents and the Faculty Presidents, chaired by the Director of Education. The main topics of discussion this semester have been lecture capture, careers and mentoring schemes.

### 13.2 Working Groups

This semester the Faculty Presidents implemented a number of working groups within EduCom to brainstorm ideas and share successful schemes between schools. I attended the Feedback working group which inspired me to implement the 'sticky notes' feedback scheme and increase the number of SSCC meetings the school has from 1 to 2.

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### 13.3 School Presidents' Forum

The School Presidents' Forum includes everyone on Education Committee plus Proctor and the Deans. The main topics of discussion this semester have been lecture capture, careers links and the NSS.

## 13. Looking forward

I have thoroughly enjoyed my first semester as your School of Biology President and look forward to continuing to represent you in semester 2 along with your hard-working class reps. It has certainly been a busy semester and semester 2 looks to be just as busy, with multiple exciting careers events, feedback sessions and focus groups all in the works. A particular highlight of S1 has been the launch of the new Biology Hive – we have all been hoping for our own building for as long as I have been at St Andrews and I am delighted to have been able to announce its opening to you all.

I look forward to March when elections will re-open and your next president will be elected - I have certainly learned a lot in this role and hope I can pass it on!

I have tried to represent you to the best of my ability this semester and hope I can do the same next semester. As always if you have any questions, concerns or ideas for events you'd like to see please do get in touch and I'll try my best to make it happen! Happy 2018 and I wish you all the best of luck for semester 2.