

SCHOOL OF ENGLISH: SEMESTER ONE REPORT

SCHOOL PRESIDENT: ELLEN WHITE

1. INTRODUCTION FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS
2. ORIENTATION
3. ELECTIONS
4. STAFF-STUDENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE
 - a. Creative Writing Marking Criteria
 - b. Dissertation Module
 - c. Ongoing Audio-Visual Issues in Sub-Honours Lectures
5. LEARNING AND TEACHING SPACES
6. SOCIAL
 - a. Stephen Boyd Common Room
7. CAREERS
8. SEMESTER TWO PLANS

1. INTRODUCTION FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

What follows in this report is a review of the activities of and action taken by the School President and class representatives of the School of English in semester one of academic year 2017-18. It details the progress and achievements of the semester, as well as the plans for events and improvements in the second semester of the year. This document will be included in the handover materials for the next president, who will be elected this semester.

Kind regards,

Ellen White,

School of English President 2017-18

22.01.2018

2. ORIENTATION

With a view to expanding the volume and range of events on offer from the School of English this year, I helped to organise and coordinate several events for Orientation ‘Freshers’ week in the School. This included a day-long drop-in centre for first-year students to ask older students any questions they had about studying English. I enlisted the help of several other students to help run this event and it was very well attended by first-year students. Later in the week I organised a literary-themed cake and coffee afternoon event in the Lawson Lecture theatre, which was well attended by students in all years- especially first and fourth year students.

Postgraduate students expressed some dissatisfaction at the range of events provided for themselves, both in general and through the school. PhD candidates commented that faculty were unlikely to attend the events run for the benefit of students meeting staff unless they knew their own supervisees would be attending. Postgraduates expressed a desire to meet and talk with research staff in the school who aren’t their supervisors, as it would make them feel more involved and integrated into the school.

ELECTIONS

Semester One elections in the School of English went relatively smoothly, with all 12 positions receiving at least one nomination by the nomination deadline, with many of those positions, especially the undergraduate positions, receiving a plurality of nominations. We successfully elected students to all 12 positions. I was happy with the SSCC structure so felt no need to add or remove positions. I would perhaps suggest that the William and Mary rep position be expanded to include all students involved in the study abroad programmes, as the specific qualms of WaMSta students tend to be taken up outside of an SSCC meeting with the relevant members of staff and subsequently the rep has very little to do in meetings.

We elected two enthusiastic postgraduate reps, Lauren Bellatti and Parker Gordon, who have both been excellently helpful and engaged and also sit on the Postgraduate Executive Committee. Several representatives were re-elected from previous years and it’s wonderful to see students consistently engaged in the running of the department. The new members of the committee have also been very engaged.

4. STAFF-STUDENT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

The School of English SSCC is composed of all 12 class representatives, the Head of School (Professor Jane Stabler), the Director of Teaching, (Dr Christine Rauer), and the school's administrative assistant, Ms. Andrea Marr.

In the first semester I chaired two informal meetings of the Class Rep Forum, where representatives raised concerns for the SSCC agenda and discussed ways of collecting feedback from students. Honours and PG representatives preferred collecting word-of-mouth feedback from their peers, as it, thus far, the only effective method we've found for collecting feedback on so many small, varied modules. The first-year representatives, Callum Irvine and Alaia Nicholson, have been collecting feedback via a year-group wide Facebook chat, which we've found useful for collecting and disseminating information. The second-years, Euan Elder and Rachael Murray, attempted a method of using post-it notes to collect feedback in lectures, which seems to have worked reasonably well.

Two meetings of the SSCC were called this semester, on the Wednesdays of Week 4 and Week 10, doubling the frequency of meetings in previous years, which staff have responded positively to as it allows issues to be resolved more quickly. The Director of Teaching, Dr Christine Rauer, has been very prompt in responding to and, where possible, resolving issues raised by students.

A. CREATIVE WRITING MARKING INSTRUCTIONS

In the last academic year 2016-17 concerns were raised by students and class representatives about the lack of specific marking instructions for creative writing assessments, a growing issue due to the school's expansion of creatively involved modules and faculty's continuing innovation in modes of assessment for modules. The regular guidance for coursework only encompasses critical and analytical essays, so is unhelpful for creative assessment. It was noted that the lack of guidance was contributing to students' anxiety about taking these extremely valuable modules, as they were uncertain on how to improve their marks throughout the semester. This issue was brought to the SSCC, and it was agreed that action could be taken on this issue and it was brought to the first School Council of the semester. After some debate about the subjective nature of creative marking, it was agreed that a draft would be drawn up and that staff would be able to consult on the inclusion of the criteria in module handbooks. With some reference to criteria used by other universities, a draft was drawn up and agreed upon by members of staff. These marking criteria will be included in handbooks this coming semester.

B. DISSERTATION MODULE

'Dissertation loneliness' has been a topic of discussion at SSCCs throughout the semester and was highlighted by the school's Mature Students rep, Kenneth Campbell. He noted that the module's low contact hours with not only staff, but other students, left him with little opportunity to discuss his work and share it with his classmates, especially since he is older and has less opportunity to socialise with other English students.

I suggested that perhaps in future years staff could aid in the organisation of Autonomous Learning Groups by helping group students with similar research interests into informal study groups who can discuss their work over coffee or in the library. This would alleviate pressure on the school to provide more contact hours and allow students to discuss their work on a voluntary basis. It was agreed that whilst ALGs are intended to be organised 'autonomously' by students' own volition, it was much harder to meet students with similar interests when there were so few contact hours, so next year the staff will trial facilitating the organisation of ALGs with the consent of interested students.

C. ONGOING AUDIO-VISUAL PROBLEMS IN SUB-HONOURS LECTURES

Both staff and students are very dissatisfied with the quality of lecturing space they've been allocated for the teaching of sub-honours lectures, with both first and second-year modules being taught across both United College Schools II and III, with a video-link between the two. There seems to be continuing issues with sound and video quality streaming to the second theatre, which whilst they *have* been addressed by IT Services, it seems that when one thing is fixed another suffers. As St Andrews prides itself on its small cohort and great staff: student teaching ratio, it's unimpressive that students are being taught by video link. The school is in desperate need of appropriate teaching spaces which can accommodate large class sizes and also have properly functioning AV equipment so that staff can be seen and heard.

5. LEARNING AND TEACHING SPACES

Much of this semester's discussion has centred around the University-wide Learning and Teaching Spaces Review. Both myself and staff have emphasised the School of English's need for suitable teaching spaces. The school currently lacks a great deal of wheelchair accessible space and is unaccommodating for events which require accessibility due to the large number of stairs in all three of the school's buildings. The retention of 66 North Street as both a postgraduate work and social space is vital to the maintenance of the school's high performance at postgraduate level and the school is keen to stress its importance to graduate students.

Students continue to appreciate the ‘bookishness’ of staff offices and enjoy taking their seminars and tutorials in these spaces.

6. SOCIAL

School of English socials continue to have a hit-and-miss attendance record. Events at the beginning of the year were well attended by first-year students. A pizza afternoon offered during reading week mostly for dissertation students was appreciated by the small group who turned up, but reading week continues to be a less favourable time to organise events around.

A collaborative pub quiz with the university Book Club was well attended and we managed to fill the top floor of the Brewing Company. The event was attended by undergraduate and postgraduate teams.

The postgraduate class reps organised a ‘writing retreat’ in the schools Stephen Boyd common room towards the end of the semester to give postgraduates the opportunity to work on final essays or other writing projects with some cake and coffee. This was well attended too!

A. STEPHEN BOYD COMMON ROOM

The Stephen Boyd room remains an underutilised study and social space in the school. I have made several efforts to advertise the space to students and use increased notably towards the end of the semester when some of the soft seating was replaced with tables more suitable for studying at. I also petitioned the Head of School for access to coffee and tea making facilities and she has agreed that students are permitted to make use of the kettle in the staff room next door, providing students use their own tea bags, mugs etc.

7. CAREERS

Students in the School of English have expressed intent to pursue a wide range of careers after graduation, from publishing to academia to advertising. There is a high-interest in careers in the Arts and Culture sectors, with publishing and other creative-oriented jobs being largely the sectors which students are most interested in hearing about from speakers. Postgraduate study is also something many students have contacted me looking for support in pursuing.

Two careers events took place through English this semester. The first was an internship experience event organised collaboratively with the School Presidents of Art History, Classics and Philosophy on October 18th, which was very well-attended by students- particularly sub-honours students, a group who tend to be harder to engage in regards to employability. Two of the three student volunteers from the School of English were MLitt students, so it was great to

have engagement between undergraduate and graduate students at this event. Next time myself and the other school presidents have noted a need for larger quantities of coffee and snacks to be ordered.

The second event was organised by third-year class rep Sam Huckstep, who invite editor and alumna Jo Dingley from Canongate publishing in Edinburgh to speak to students about her career. This event was also well attended and students had lots of questions for her.

The role of the Careers Liason in the department continues to be a dubious one and mine seems uncertain of his remit.

8. SEMESTER TWO PLANS

I hope to have two SSCC meetings organised for this semester in the coming week. I hope to have one either side of Spring break, the latter of which I will invite the president-elect for the next academic year to attend, providing they aren't already a class rep, as is often the case. I would like to collect feedback on the reception of the new creative writing modules and further ways to improve the Stephen Boyd room as a study and social space. I will strive to make the handover to the next president as smooth as possible.

For the first week of semester two the school is collaborating with the Eighteenth-Century Reading Group on a Jane Austen pub quiz at the Brewing Company again. I hope to organise more literary-themed events in collaboration with societies, as they seem to garner a good attendance.

Again, myself and the presidents of Classics, Art History and Philosophy hope to collaborate on a careers event later this semester, and I hope to organise one event in just the School of English with the help of the employability reps, Tom and Genevieve. I hope to further engage this semester's careers liason, Professor Zinnie Harris.