

DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY FOR DISCIPLINES

Definitions

In subsequent sections the following definitions apply:

- “Service course” means a course offered by a department different from the department fielding the programme and the bulk of the courses taken by the student.
- “Serviced department” refers to a department or other unit seeking either a course or the services of an academic in another department.
- “Service teaching” refers to teaching catering for students in another department or programme.

The Issues

This document addresses the following set of questions:

- a) What is the locus of authority, and of accountability, for a course?
- b) How should decisions be made with regard to course offerings and quality assurance mechanisms?
- c) What guidelines govern the relationship between the serviced department and the department whose services it seeks, and decisions regarding the content and resourcing of service courses?
- d) What guidelines govern the decisions as to which departments may offer specified courses?

General Rule

- 1) The general rule is that a course, irrespective of the curriculum in which it is presented, will have a formally recognised departmental location, referred to as its home department. In this case responsibility for offering the course will be with the home department. In most cases, the appropriate departmental location for a course will be the department associated with the discipline within which the course is rooted.
- 2) There will be situations in which a course arises out of collaboration between more than one department. The code may then reflect its multiple departmental affiliations. Such a course will be taught by staff members from the departments concerned.

Some remarks on these rules follow:

- a) In 1) above, a course will carry the code of its home department and will be taught by staff members appointed in the home department. Intellectual oversight and quality assurance measures will be the responsibility of the head of that department.

- b) In 2) the coding, teaching and quality assurance of the course will depend on the particular circumstances. The examples at the end of this document illustrate some of the possibilities that may arise.

Guidelines in decision-making and resolution of disputes

While the question as to the appropriate location of a course is in many cases a straightforward matter, there are situations in which disputes about the departmental location of a course will arise. The following is a set of guidelines for use in resolving disputes concerning nomenclature and departmental affiliation when more than one cognate department at the University can reasonably be expected to have an interest in the name, structure and content of a course. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the linkage of courses to organisational units, and situations are likely to vary substantially by department and faculty.

The guidelines refer to the desirability of achieving consensus in situations in which disagreement arises. In all such cases, where there is a failure to achieve consensus, a higher level authority such as the dean should facilitate. The Senate Teaching & Learning Committee should be the ultimate arbiter in any disagreements on the location or mounting of courses.

- 1) *Reasonableness*: The most basic principle of application is reasonableness. Decisions should be made on the basis of the best reasons. Academic considerations should take priority when making decisions to ensure that teaching (either course work or supervision of dissertations) is undertaken by those with specific expertise in the area. Administrative solutions should be found for administrative problems, which should not be allowed to drive inappropriate academic decisions.
- 2) *Transparency*: A department wishing to mount a course in an area in which another department could have a reasonable expectation of authority or involvement, must at an early stage inform that department of its intentions, and engage with that department on issues of content, quality, depth and location, ideally with a view to achieving consensus on the appropriate departmental location of the course and its attributes.
- 3) *Collegiality*: Decisions should be made collegially. In the first instance, this should be done between the relevant departments and their heads.
- 4) *Locus of authority for courses*: In situations in which there is a dispute about the department to which a course most reasonably belongs, the determining consideration will ordinarily be the requisite skills or expertise in the application of the course content rather than the subject matter to which the skills are being applied. Contestation about nomenclature and departmental affiliation should be based on a mutual commitment to promoting the development of knowledge through supporting existing disciplines (disciplinarity), facilitating the development of new disciplines (transdisciplinarity), and combining disciplines (multi-disciplinarity).

Whilst appropriate expertise is crucial in determining the appropriate location for a course, it is inappropriate for a department to make appointments in order to acquire such expertise without collegial consultation with affected departments. One part of the University should not make appointments that duplicate expertise that exists elsewhere in the University, without thorough consultation with affected departments. This is subject to the caveat that

duplication of expertise may not exist where sub-disciplines or evolving disciplines may require specific skills not necessarily present in a parent discipline.

- 5) *Teaching quality*: Heads of home departments are expected to ensure appropriate standards for the teaching and resourcing of service courses, as they are for other courses within their departments. All courses will thus only be approved by a dean or other relevant authority once the normal quality assurance mechanisms have been established.
- 6) *Teaching aptness*: Irrespective of whether there is service teaching taking place or not, the main point is that the importance of the 'context of application' of the teaching is key to achieving the course objectives no matter who the teacher is or from which department they come. Equally important are considerations that relate to the requisite expertise, and the perspective that experts are able to bring to bear on their teaching. Decisions should attend to the appropriateness of the level and approach of the teaching for the curricular context of the service teaching. In determining the syllabus, the course convenor should consult with relevant staff in the serviced department and the relevant programme committee on issues pertaining to the educational purpose of the service course, and in particular the foundation, content and mode of assessment which it is intended to provide.
- 7) *Fairness*: There should be no coercion either by serviced departments making it impossible for home departments to teach service courses, nor by home departments to coerce potentially serviced departments to accept service courses where these are not apt. Fairness specifically includes:
 - Equitable distribution of revenue from teaching courses between the department housing the course convenor(s), the department housing the programme convenor, and/or the department housing supervisors for related dissertation course components or full dissertations.
 - The need to solve problems of operationalising cross-faculty teaching given currently diverse fee and course structures.
 - Counting significant teaching inputs by staff in a department (other than their own) towards that staff member's workload in his/her own department.
- 8) *The priority of courses over modules*: Although there are situations in which service teaching will most reasonably take place as a module within the broader context of a non-service course, such a possibility should not be used as an excuse to bypass the standard arrangement of a service course which carries the code of the department offering the course. Where service teaching takes place in a module within a course, the other principles should apply to the module with the same force that they would otherwise apply to courses.

Some examples

- 1) Courses in subjects that exist as a sequence leading to a major necessarily 'belong' to the department offering the major.
- 2) Physics provides an example of a course being mounted outside of a department with an interest in oversight and accountability. ASPECT, the academic development programme in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, offers a course in physics, which is taught by ASPECT staff. It is the Physics Department which, however, retains academic oversight over the course.
- 3) While the bulk of the teaching of statistics is carried out by the Department of Statistical Sciences, courses in the subject are located in many other departments. While Statistical Sciences is the department housing the relevant major, this does not imply that all courses in statistics should necessarily be taught by Statistical Sciences. However, the department should be in a position to exercise oversight in the sense of satisfying itself as to the academic rationale for location and resourcing of courses in statistics in other departments, and the mechanisms for quality assurance.
- 4) Mechanics is an example of a course with multiple home departments. It is well established in curricula in physics, mathematics, and various engineering programmes. The subject matter and flavour are distinct in each case, and none of these departments has an exclusive claim to the subject. Similarly, microbiology exists in Molecular and Cell Biology, in the Science Faculty, and Clinical Laboratory Sciences, in the Faculty of Health Sciences.
- 5) Courses in emergent interdisciplinary areas which have not yet bedded down into a clear disciplinary identity may become the subject of contestation. Examples include the teaching of Heritage in a programme on the Built Environment, a course on Identity in a programme in Environmental and Geographical Science, and courses in Bioinformatics in Science and Health Sciences. Disputes as well as agreement on standards, and the appropriate use of resources, have to be resolved by negotiation.
- 6) Suppose that Department A wants to offer a course in ethics, as applied to its area of research and teaching. It should approach the Philosophy Department with a request that the Philosophy Department offer, teach or oversee a service course that is apt to the needs of the department. If Department A believes that there are cogent reasons for building capacity in ethics within its department, this should be discussed between heads of department and, if necessary, the relevant deans.
- 7) There are instances in which courses arise out of collaboration between more than one department. Such courses will have a custodial department. One option for coding would be for the course to carry that department's code. An existing option is that the course carries a multidisciplinary code (for example, BIO for courses taught by Botany and Zoology, ERT for those taught by Archaeology, Geological Sciences, and Environmental and Geographical Science).

Senate
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