

Student Forum, October 2, 2015

Chemistry Student Feedback Summary and Department of Chemistry Response

The second annual chemistry student forum was hosted by the Publicity and Undergraduate Recruitment Committee (PURC) on Oct 2, 2015 in BWC A104. The forum was attended by 20 students. Faculty in attendance were: Matt Moffitt (chair) and Neil Burford. Notes were taken by Lori Aasebo. The forum topics were: 1. Course Support; 2. Student Workload; and 3. Curriculum Review. The current document provides a summary of student feedback on each topic, followed by the Department response.

1. Course Support.

a.) Student Feedback:

Students were reminded that a suggestion from last year's forum was to have office hours in a classroom rather than in an office and several lecturers have implemented this change. The idea was to create a more informal classroom setting where students can either ask questions or just listen; students agreed that this change was helpful but expressed the following concerns and suggestions regarding course support: 1. Classrooms with tables rather than tiny desks would make it easier to take notes; 2. More hours and flexibility would be better since sometimes classes/labs/tutorials conflict with office hours; 3. Later office hours, starting around 5 pm, would be better for most students. 4. Extra tutorials or several TAs at some tutorials would be helpful due to high turnout. 5. Some students are not aware of drop-in centres.

One student commented that they switched to Chemistry since it is easier to meet with instructors compared to their former department. Another student asked whether there is a drop-in centre for CHEM 232 (there isn't). It was also commented that there is now a drop-in centre for CHEM 231 whereas there used to be none.

b.) Department Response:

The Chair will inform instructors that students prefer rooms with tables and encourage them to indicate this preference when booking rooms for office hours. The Chair will also

encourage faculty and lab instructors to offer scheduled office hours/drop-in hours each week and will inform instructors that the window 5-6 pm is generally preferred by students.

Adjustments in resourcing of some courses in Chemistry have enabled the Department to offer support to students in courses where there was previously insufficient support. In the past, some courses were more resourced than others, and reallocation of resources therefore resulted in some changes in support. With regard to specific allocation of drop-in resources for all courses offered in Chemistry, the Department is still refining the plan.

Information on office hours and drop-in centres is usually included on each course website, on CourseSpaces, and/or in the syllabus. The Chair will remind instructors to make this information available on the website and in the course syllabus.

Multiple TAs participating in a drop-in centre at the same time is not a viable strategy due to resource limitations; the benefits of offering more hours outweigh the benefits of offering fewer hours with more TAs.

2. Student Workload.

a.) Student Feedback:

To begin the discussion, students were told that the Department is aware that student workload in Chemistry is demanding; the Department is trying to balance student workload and to encourage students to complete a degree in four years by taking five courses per term. Students indicated they have been told that four years for a chemistry degree is unrealistic due to the workload. Students also indicated that the workload for 36X labs is equal to two courses but they only get half the credit. Can the credit be increased for 36X labs to match the workload? Lab workload has improved in recent years at UVic (said returning student) but more needs to be done.

One student commented that because there is now a 3-hour time limit for labs there have been situations in which students were not able to finish the lab and were penalized in the marking as a result. Lab work within a set time needs to be reasonable; students need to know what's expected in a lab, and time for learning new instruments and techniques needs to be taken into account. Students indicated that one is disadvantaged in lab courses if one has not worked in

a research lab or taken a work term. In second year there are introductory lab demos, but not in third or fourth year, or at least these are not always given by the TAs; some students feel that they are missing required information to finish on time as a result. Lab TA quality is hit and miss, which can make it hard; a couple of students indicated that they would be willing to volunteer in labs to demonstrate.

Some students asked if there could be more teamwork in labs (2 or 3 in groups); one student commented they would prefer to work with others to talk it through, which would help learning and productivity. Other students countered that independence and confidence are necessary in the workplace so students shouldn't rely on teamwork, although the same students said that more group work would be very helpful in first year labs.

Students also commented that there is a rumour is that UVic's chemistry degree provides students with more material and experience than chemistry degrees than other universities.

b.) Department Response:

Members of the Department have discussed credit level for 36X courses to facilitate timely completion of a Chemistry degree. The discussion is ongoing. Workload adjustments have been implemented as recognized by students and the Department will continue to review and revise student workload.

The Chair has mandated to instructors that the timetabled lab class times be enforced within the lab. However, the Department also strongly agrees that work expectations within the set timeframe must be reasonable and allow students to finish their work in the allotted time. The Chair will remind instructors of the importance of aligning expectations in the lab with the time allotted to finish the lab.

With regard to TA quality, the Department values the importance of TA excellence and always seeks to improve TA quality through efforts beyond baseline training. For example, the Department has appointed a TA consultant for the last two years (first Emma Nichols-Allison, now Corrina Ewan) to provide advice and feedback to TAs. Although the volunteering of undergraduates to help teach in the labs is appreciated, this is not feasible due to safety/insurance regulations. The Chair will write to Senior Lab Instructors and ask them to inform/remind TAs that pre-lab demos are mandatory when appropriate.

In response to questions about more teamwork in the labs, the Department points out that teamwork is already implemented in our labs (e.g. CHEM 222 and CHEM 245), although the historical philosophy of the Department has always been to promote practical independence. However, the Department is aware of the pedagogical advantages of increased teamwork in the lab, and this issue will be discussed thoroughly in the context of the ongoing curriculum review.

3. Other Suggestions or Concerns.

a.) Student Feedback:

Students indicated that an information session for first year students about chemistry programs would be helpful.

a.) Department Response:

The Department held the first annual undergraduate chemistry programs information session and pizza party on February 26 in BWC A104. ~75 undeclared students, curious about chemistry, attended the event to learn about our programs and to ask questions to the expert panel of Chemistry and ChemMedSci students, who provided valuable insights and advice.