Comments/Feedback to proposed Curriculum changes_Don Sannella

RT#242553

Informatics Board of Studies - 2pm Wednesday, 5th December 2018_

Curriculum progress report/heads-up on BoS_Don Sannella

Subject: Re: curriculum progress report/heads-up on BoS
Date: Mon, 3 Dec 2018 08:27:17 +0000
From: Don Sannella <dts@inf.ed.ac.uk>
Organisation: University of Edinburgh
To: Sharon Goldwater <sgwater@inf.ed.ac.uk>, Paul Anderson
<dcspaul@ed.ac.uk>, Volker Seeker <Volker.Seeker@ed.ac.uk>
CC: WELSH Alex <Alexandra.Welsh@ed.ac.uk>

Dear all,

I'm travelling and can't come to the BoS meeting. Here are my comments on the Inf1B proposal -

I support the proposal. Now that I've read comments from colleagues I have some concerns, but we should be careful not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Yes, it is possible that students will cheat.

They can cheat on exams too although it is easier to cheat on coursework. Yes, some students might not learn very much, either because they deliberately cheat or because they get a little too much help from their classmates. But this is a first-year course. We are trying to teach core concepts and basic skills and since the grade doesn't contribute to the final honours class, it is effectively pass/fail. If Informatics students deliberately avoid learning to program then they are being very foolish and will suffer later. I think there is a very good chance that they will learn more and be more engaged with this course than with the current Inf1B. That's the most important thing, and we should be making it as good as it can be in that respect.

Here are some details based on my experience of teaching first-year students during the past 7 years. If you publish comments, maybe some of these are not worth including.

I am worried about how students working together will work. We want to encourage this to some degree - both in their groups and via Piazza, and in Inf1A this is strongly encouraged - but discourage academic misconduct. Students will rightly be very worried about where the borderline is between beneficial and forbidden kinds of working together. It isn't just using somebody else's work without attribution, as the proposal suggests (Sect 4.2 just before the paragraph on resits); what about asking questions on Piazza involving code fragments? How big does a code fragment from a student's solution need to be before it stops being a question about a detail and starts being inappropriate sharing? First-year students are really uncertain about such things, and experience in Inf1A suggests that there will be LOTS of questions about this, possibly even getting in the way of the actual content of the course.

What does "completion of weekly exercises" mean - what is the minimum required? Any submission whatsoever? Does it need to compile? Does it need to pass some tests?

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I think we will have enough tutors if we encourage the UG2 students who have done well on the course to be tutors. MIT has an introductory programming course which they allow students to test out of; the students who do best on the test are invited to be TAs for the course. I have used UG2 tutors in Inf1A and on average they are better than PhD tutors.

I think random assignment of students to groups is better than having strong and weak (and Chinese, sorry for picking on them) groups.

Auto marking: of course it is not a panacea. There is a lot of space between auto marking-only and no auto marking.

Student engagement in group work: Some students will not engage *at all* and group work needs to be designed to take this into account. Something like what is proposed to deal with components that are supposed to be supplied by such students ("importing" from another group) is absolutely essential.

I see nothing addressing Perdita's point 20: will outside students be welcome? I am quite worried about her point 21 (the need to re-do some/all of the work on the framework for the coursework every year).

Best regards, Don

On 26/11/2018 10:22, Sharon Goldwater wrote:
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Dear CRC folks,
Sorry for not providing more regular updates about curriculum progress. We do seem to be making progress though.

Some key decisions will be made at the upcoming BoS meeting (5 Dec). In particular, we'll be tabling course proposals for Inf1b and Inf2-IADS, as well as for the overall structure of the new pre-honours curriculum and a plan to get there.

The papers for these items are attached here and will be submitted to the BoS agenda tomorrow, barring any immediate comments/suggestions from you or others now looking at them.
I would very much appreciate if you could either attend the BoS meeting or provide *written* comments indicating whether you support these proposals (cc me and Alexandra Welsh as BoS secretary).

Thanks,
AuH2O

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