

Updates on curriculum review: need for reduction in course offerings

Sharon Goldwater, 6 November 2017

I've been asked to present this paper related to the curriculum review and discussion at Teaching Day in September. While no concrete proposal is on the table yet, it is becoming clear that our review is likely to propose:

- A reduction in the number of level 10/11 courses on offer
- Somewhat more constrained options for students in year 3

This paper is intended to highlight the many advantages of moving in this direction, despite the obvious disadvantage (fewer options for students), and to take comments from other staff.

Potential disadvantages:

These moves will by definition reduce options for some students. Of the 17 staff who responded to my questionnaire on Teaching Day, almost invariably they felt that one of the positive aspects about our curriculum is its flexibility and/or the ability of undergraduates to take advanced/specialized courses.

Potential advantages:

Both teaching staff and ITO face increasing demands in some of our very largest courses. There is an increasing imbalance in the size of courses (see Figure 1, next page; data from early Oct), and maintaining many small courses drains resource. Having so many course options also makes it difficult for many students to decide which courses they want, which leads to later registration, difficulty in planning for numbers, and considerable administrative overhead from switching.

Whether or not we are able to reduce our overall student numbers, reducing the number of courses we offer would allow us to better focus our attention on the remaining courses and do a better job with them, for example by deploying multiple staff members onto the largest courses, freeing up more time to try innovative methods, or having some staff supervise larger numbers of projects in lieu of some classroom teaching.

A somewhat more constrained year three curriculum would also ensure better coverage of "core" concepts, as defined by external bodies such as the ACM. We are in the process of determining how much of the ACM's core curriculum we actually cover at the moment, but my initial impression is that students could easily graduate without having seen significant parts of it.

