# Department of Computing - Macquarie University

Minutes for the 200-Level Liaison Meeting  
22nd October 2014 at 1pm in E6A357

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<td>Rebekah Coote</td>
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<td>Shireen Karnib</td>
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<td>Yvonne Nemes</td>
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<td>Sean Gillies</td>
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<td>Hijab Alavi</td>
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<tr>
<th>Staff Name</th>
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<td>Stephen Smith</td>
<td>Chair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christophe Doche</td>
<td>Head of Department</td>
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<td>Melina Chan</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
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<td>Natalia Salzberg</td>
<td>Science IT Manager</td>
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<td>Richard Miller</td>
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<td>Matt Roberts</td>
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<td>Matt Mansour</td>
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<td>Jian Yang</td>
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<td>Eng Lim</td>
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<td>Len Hamey</td>
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<td>Mike Johnson</td>
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The meeting opened at 1:02 pm by Stephen Smith. Stephen welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**ISYS200 - IT and the Future of Society**

*Matthew Mansour*

SR felt that the unit got better as it went along – stabilised. Tutors have a better idea of what is going on. There is a general sense that students have a better idea of what to expect. Any conversations that SR has had with other students have been quite positive in terms of feedback. Particularly topic wise - students found the topics relevant, interesting, thought-provoking, things they hadn’t considered before and discussions came up as a result of that.

**Tutorials:**
SR felt the debates worked really well and in their class were facilitated really well. Everyone got up and had a chance to talk. Debates were interesting and thought-provoking at the same time. Felt the debates were more useful than the presentations because with the debates you get a chance to look at different perspectives. With the debates everyone speaks so everyone has to do something. With the presentations only two people speak, so not everyone has to do something.

SR felt that with tutorials the groups should stay together once they start in week one. SR is in a group of six and two of them have never presented and are constantly dodging.

MM explained that the reason they mixed groups up was purely because they thought it would be an opportunity for everyone to speak. Never thought it would be a process that someone would be able to dodge the bullet every time. If they left the group the same, some students would say they wished there were mixed groups. There can be flexibility. MM can say to the tutor if it feels that the groups are working, leave it be but if it feels it isn’t working, move the groups around.

SR felt it depends on the dynamic of the class and some students enjoy the mixed groups.

*Comment from a Student Rep who did not attend the liaison meeting:*

Lectures are great and extremely engaging.

The tutorial is productive and inviting environment, with the tutor being engaging and personable. It is a friendly and constructive atmosphere. Feels they are very beneficial. Being forced to work in varying groups for the weekly tasks was nice, as often you couldn’t communicate well with others, for whatever reason. For this, it made it nice to know that the next week, you may not have that issue and could be more productive.

**General:**
SR talked about the concept of the liaison meetings and sees the relevance of them. No other Departments does this. Students felt the meetings were invaluable and appreciated the fact that their advice was taken on board.

SS replied that it was good transparency and students could give feedback that the staff otherwise wouldn’t receive.

MM said he knows the liaison meetings are a good thing because FBE are trying to copy our Department.

MM advised that he has addressed an issue from the last liaison meeting and has been putting up a Student Forum, just for the week.
SR: Pretty good and pretty solid since everything has been going along. Pattern has been going well. There was a little bit of a discrepancy with the assignment. A couple of people didn’t understand. SR explained the context of this. Students were given a code bundle which has AI component which students are supposed to generate using a strategy pattern and supposed to make a change so you can go through and select the different cells. While this assignment in itself wasn’t that difficult, a couple of people got caught up in the wording of Part 1. They got confused because it said discuss very briefly the strategy pattern. What students actually had to do was to implement Java's strategy pattern in the board. So students actually got confused between do they make this Board the pattern or do they make this another class. That seems to be the biggest problem that SR has seen so far in this course. Apart from that, it seems to be pretty well flowing. Content seems to be pretty good.

The other biggest complaint is regarding tutorials. SR received a couple of emails about marking and the lack of feedback on weekly submission tasks. Apart from that been going pretty smoothly.

MR explained that the situation with feedback on weekly tasks is that there is time allocated in class for the tutor to give one-on-one feedback to the answers the students have given during the week. The situation that MR understand one of the tutor does not have enough time to get that done. Other tutors are finding they do have enough time to get it done. This is something that can be addressed.

SR has passed all of the weekly submission tasks but finds there is sort of a gap between passing and having a full grasp of everything you would possibly want to know. So sometimes the solutions and there is still a gap between what they submitted and what the solutions has in it. SR suggested it might be useful every week to get the last week or week before solutions and that is something that could be covered in tutorial classes.

SR discussed Reading Game, felt like there needs to be a bit more monitoring of the questions. Some of the questions have very broken English and others are completely off topic. One question was: What is the best position in the Lecture Theatre? and this has been on rotation for weeks.

SR said that Reading Game is very exploitable. The scoring system is rather arbitrary. Discovered you can get stars – pretty sure it is for being in top ten for some amount of time but there is no indication of it. Ask ++ system is completely under-utilised. If you know things about scripts it is not good for the Reading Game.

MR explained that the Reading Game was a bit of an experiment this Semester. Worth about 8%. He will be trawling through all of the data in the Reading Game when allocating marks and won’t be relying on numbers that pop out of it because he knows how exploitable it is. This process is part of us learning whether it is robust enough to be used in a more automatic fashion. Tried to make it feel like he was going to use it automatically so he wasn’t pre-judging how he was going to mark it. His plan at the end of the Semester is to trawl through everything and see who has actually written a good question and allocate marks on that basis. He can’t advise the conclusion about whether they will use the Reading Game again or not in the future. By the end of the Semester he would love to know whether students think it is redeemable, wonderful or it should be turfed. MR asked if any students had used Peer Wise? This is an alternative system that tries to do a similar thing. It is built differently and might not have the particular issues that students find come up.

SR used Peer Wise and thought it was alright but thought there would probably be the same issues with it. SR knows of someone cheating the system in Marketing.

SR felt it definitely has some utility in terms of you can learn stuff by answering good questions on there.
MR stated his attitude is that he is happy for anyone to cheat the system, they just won’t get any marks at the end of the Semester. He is not even going to bother explaining that in class. It is 8 marks and the 8 marks for the Reading Game are supposed to be hard to get marks and there will be a significant amount of students mucking around with it and won’t be getting those marks. He definitely wants students considered opinions on Reading Game once it is all done and dusted, so we can know whether it is worth using again or how it can be tweaked.

SR suggested using an edit button if using Reading Game again because if you do find a problem with your question, it gets buried if you deactivate it and makes another one.

**COMP255 - Software Engineering**

*Michael Johnson, Steve Cassidy*

SR: Enjoying lectures, course and everything. The enforced teamwork is beneficial.

SR: Nice to have a lecture where the lecturer is very passionate about the subject. You don’t feel you are in a lecture, you feel like you are in a thought-provoking environment. Excited for the next assignment.

MJ explained have been doing things differently and changed a lot from the way 255 was done previously and we are starting to make plans for how it is done next year. Asked students what they would change.

SR suggested introducing programming.

SR suggested clearer notes. A lot of what MJ says is not actually on his slides. This actually makes lectures more interesting – not just reading off slides. Maybe some point of reference for extra information.

SR suggested case study materials that students can read on things that MJ talks about. Even just a couple of pages of text. Even if it wasn’t compulsory, would find something like that useful in processing what they had taken in.

Biggest downfall with the subject is the workshops. Seems to be a lot of redundancy. Students have to repeat themselves a lot. Getting really redundant, especially with overlap with 229. Student Reps are in Jasmine and Nader’s workshops. It seems to be stretching out little work over a 2 hour workshop. Seem to be wasting a lot of time in there. Also the agile development with the snappers? From SR understanding that is a terrible thing to do agile development with because it doesn’t work in sprint. Not sure what the aim of that exercise is. It doesn’t seem to justify a 2 hour workshop.

MJ asked if we were more careful about the content, would the actual teachers and the way they are teaching be fine?

SR had to explain some things to their tutor. She didn’t know the difference between non-functional requirements and specifications.

SR: In lectures, students often have to stop because not everyone is a games design or software tech person. Have to ask if everyone know what classes are and class diagrams. Gets a little annoying having to make those small stops. Maybe need to rethink the pre-requisites.

MJ answered that the Department has added 125 as a pre-requisite for next year.

SR: Agreed this was good and should address a lot of those things.

*Comment from a Student Rep that did not attend the liaison meeting:*
Having trouble adjusting to Mike’s teaching style which leads to low attendance rate in lectures and which may reflect performance in the course not being great.

Enjoys the tutorial class but finds the tutor hard to communicate with. Clarity in the tasks sometimes needs to be better and often an interpretation of the task has lead to a solution that was perhaps not intended.

**COMP202 - Systems Programming**

*Len Hamey*

SR: Struggle for a lot of the students still seems to be the gap between the technical understanding from the lectures and the practical application of that stuff in the assignments. 99% of workshops are spent basically going over workflow for solving assignments eg. this is what you have to do, this is the tool you are going to need. Even in tutes as well, explaining to students what they have to do to use the knowledge they have. For the last assignment there is probably going to be 2 or 3 weeks of work that people are going to have to do just understanding how to pass the arguments, how to create the structures they are going to need to parse those memory traces. Thinks a lot of students are going to have a tough time with that and not have a lot of time or being able to spend a lot of time doing the real work – making a cache.

Same with the previous assignment. There was a lot of throwing in really long strings and seeing what happened. Tutor had to go over in tutorial, pretty explicitly, how to dynamically see what is happening when you put a string into the program, how to print the call stack. Dynamically students had to have that given to them on a platter. SR guesses that the intention of the tutes and workshop are the real practical part and that is where students have to learn the practical side of it.

LH asked what would help with that? Does going through the workflow work (and LH knows the tutors have paid a lot of attention to this) or does it still leave students thinking they have to go through the steps but not really understanding what they are doing?

SR agreed that it helps but takes a long time. A lot of students cannot necessarily do anything on their own time. They might need two full workshops of getting help and watching the tutor do the work before they can solve the problem and start to finish. They might not get everything they need from the first 2 hours – after 2 workshops – that most of the time you have for assignments is knocked off. Especially when students had the one running over the mid semester. Think there was only 1 or 2 workshops that people got to work on buflab. Last workshop the SR had was actually 3 days before the buflab was due and 2 days after it was originally due, there was still people trying to understand how to solve the first and second part of the buflab and that is pretty basic decompiling.

LH questioned was that because students didn’t start it until then? So they weren’t trying to understand it in the previous two workshops? Or they were trying to understand but just couldn’t get their heads around it and went away and said they would do some other assignment in some other unit and ignore this one for a couple more weeks?

SR thought that a lot of people found moving to C and then assembly code was so different than working with Java and high level languages they were used to – it just kept getting pushed back. They would deal with Java stuff now and then try to handle the rest later and once they got there, they realised the complexity was a bit higher and they shot themselves in the foot. Arguably it was their fault but they probably need a lot more of a hand getting into assembly in the early stages.

SR said he had a lot of time to mess around and play around with GDB and that really helped with buflab as well. However, not everyone has the time that SR had to input and into just playing with the tools and seeing what you could do with them.
SR thinks the biggest struggle is going to be C programs.

LH can see what is happening here and from his perspective using malloc and free – they are pretty trivial things but for students it feels like because they have to work with these complicated data structures, it is going to be a whole lot more difficult. When in fact, all you need is a chunk of bytes and just need to know how many bytes to ask for. LH thinks it might help with current assignment if he produces a couple of sample C programs. A sample C program that does some reading of some data – not this particular file but something else – so students can get an example of how to read data. Also maybe something that uses malloc and free like C data structure so they can see how those things work. LH asked if it would be helpful?

SR thinks that some sample code would go a long way in helping students to understand.

**ISYS224 - Database Systems**

*Jian Yang, Eng Lim*

SR: With unit there is a lot of content. Suggests, like for 104, a mid-semester exam or quiz or something so you can constantly revise. This might be an unpopular opinion. It would make it easier for studying for final exam.

JY agreed it was a good idea. Used to have weekly submissions but abandoned it as it was too much work. Thinks mid-semester exam could be a good way to let students assess what they have learnt.

SR: The first half of the unit felt very much like revision. Doing same things done in 114 and even 249 and maybe could give more focus on something else.

JY understands that in 114 students learnt modelling and SQL. For 224 it is supposed to be more intense and an extension. In terms of modelling, model more complicated scenarios, more advanced SQL. This is really part of database core. In the past, students performed quite poorly in normalisation in SQL.

MM said that students had to remember that if you are doing 114 right now, then realistically the next time you will touch SQL again would be in 2015 2nd Semester – so nearly a year. So there has to be a bit of revision to jog students memory.

SR suggested to maybe include some more advanced stuff at the end for those that have done it more regularly and work in the industry. A lot of people in SRs tute work in industry.

SR said that you have to remember that those students are a small minority and a lot of students need that revision. Have to see the different sides.

SR: Regarding assignment 1 – every tutor said something different about one of the answers. Wasn’t sure who was right.

SS suggested the SR have a chat to JY about this issue later.
General Issues

Labs:

Wireless down that morning. Internet slow. MQ OneNet and MQ Public down. NS said if you were outside it was fine but if you were inside it was not fine. Issue was resolved about an hour ago.

Communication:

LH asked about iLearn spam and if it was getting any better.

SR said that Digest comes through at 3.00 am and you cannot unsubscribe.

SR said if you disable it, you disable other important things from other units.

SR commented on one particular email, if you try to unsubscribe, it takes you to unsubscribe from MQ mailing list.

NS asked student to send a copy of the email to help@mq.

MM asked how many emails students were receiving a week.

Some students only get weekly announcements, while others were receiving between 3 to 20 emails per week.

CD asked what students, if they had the choice, would like to receive?

SR said would like to receive only announcements from the lecturer and Digest.

SR commented on the thing he liked about the SIBT Portal was that when you logged in you were given a page that gave you all the important announcements from lecturer. So you didn’t have to go to email or go through units individually – it is all there in the one spot. This was really great and very effective.

LH asked how many 202 students were aware that he had put up sample exam questions and materials and how they found out about that?

SR said that some students found out through the Digest email and some compulsively read iLearn.

SS thanked both staff and students for attending the meetings and making it worthwhile. It is the last liaison meeting for the year. SS wished students good luck with their exams.

The meeting closed at 1.50 pm.