

# Course report BL5026 HT20 Evolutionary Biology 15 hp

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**Course coordinator**

Rachel Steward

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**Number of students taking exam/other relevant examination form**

15

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**Number of students passed**

15

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**Description of any changes since the last time the course was given**

I took over as course leader, and PO Karis from DEEP taught the molecular phylogenetics activities while Aelys Humphreys was on maternity leave. The structure of the course was similar to the past, with the exception of it being held online, meaning that computer labs and other hands-on activities were less supervised.

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**Positive things about the course according to students (summary based on both quantitative data from evaluation and the students' text answers)**

1. While the distance-learning teaching over zoom was difficult to implement it allowed for more one-on-one interactions with the students (we could easily set up meetings outside of class time) and motivated me and the other instructors to engage more with their submitted work, given it was difficult to give feedback during class time. This was reflected in the students' responses: 83% of respondents felt the teaching methods were relevant to the course, and 92% felt that we the teachers were able to help them reach the learning outcomes. Specifically one student found that zoom made it easier to deal with the course load, because only 2 hours of the day were devoted to the lecture.

2. Students were very appreciative of the enthusiasm and availability of course instructors. 100% of respondents felt they received constructive feedback and 83% felt encouraged to reflect on their learning throughout the course. Again, 83% felt they were able to receive support when they needed it. Among the comments on the "Best aspects of the course", students consistently referred to engagement, enthusiasm, and encouragement.

3. Many of the students found the focus on scientific writing to be difficult but beneficial. Students wrote 2-4 short essays a week, and finished the course with a medium-length essay on a topic of their choice. One student wrote, "I really feel like I have developed my evolutionary and biological 'thinking'." Several other students mentioned the daily essays specifically among the best aspects of the course. In the advice to future participants, the reading and writing was consistently referenced, but often in terms of how to be more successful with the writing process, which I really see as a positive take-away. That said, the overall response was that students found the work overwhelming at times so it would be good to reconsider the amount of writing so the students can focus on the quality of writing.

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**Things about the course that could be improved according to students (summary based on both quantitative data from evaluation and the students' text answers)**

1. Building on the positive remarks of the students about the focus on writing, the major conclusion from the review is that many of the students found the workload unmanageable at one point in the course or another, and that the requirement that essays be turned in by 18 the same day was untenable, especially for the longer chapters. The majority of the students reported spending 35-45 hours a week on a course. I know several of the students were working as well as studying, which would have been very difficult to manage given the workload of the course.

2. Multiple students felt the lab on molecular phylogenetics was poorly integrated into the course, and I agree. Neither I nor Dr. Karis were familiar with the organization of these activities in past years and we didn't do very well preparing the students for the activities.

3. I was a little concerned that several of the students (25% of respondents) felt the exam did not feel like the exam tested them well on the learning outcomes of the course. There were not specific comments about the exam, but I wonder if being clear early on in the course about how the exam and essay contributed to the final grade, and what the exam would cover, might have helped with this feeling.

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**Teachers' analysis of the course**

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Overall, I felt the course went very well. I was incredibly impressed by the critical thinking and communication skills of the students. We had interesting discussions in class and in the feedback sections of their assignments on Athena. I gave detailed feedback on all of their writing assignments, especially at the beginning of the course, and I think this made the students both feel more confident in their writing and find more meaning in the activities. The students did an admirable job managing the writing and reading demands of the course, which were designed to challenge their existing habits. I was glad to have guest lecturers talk to the students about their areas of expertise, and I hope the students appreciated that exposure. On the other hand, I invited several guests to help with lectures that didn't fully align with their research areas and I think the students found these lectures a little disorienting, as it was unclear why a new lecturer was in charge that day. I was particularly disappointed by the molecular phylogenetics lab. I did a poor job planning the learning objectives for that week's activities, considering how they fit into the wider structure of the course, and anticipating the difficulties students might have with some of the activities. Dr. Karis was a great help and very knowledgeable, but in future the course leader and instructor(s) of this lab section will have to work together more closely to make the lab a success.

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**Conclusions and suggestions for changes (if any)**

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I'll just take a moment to repeat how much I enjoyed teaching this group of students. They were thoughtful, interested, creative, hard-working. It made teaching a delight. Even though the writing demands were largely the same as in years past, I think this is one area of the course that may need to change or be modified, especially for the longer chapters of the book and in the first week of the course.

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