Report on COMP3610/6361 Principles of Programming Languages - Semester 2 2015

Course Title. Principles of Programming Languages

Course Convenor. Clem Baker-Finch (Lecturer and Convenor) and Dirk Pattinson (Lecturer)

Number of Students. 35

Percentage of Student Feedback. 15/35 $\approx 42\%$

Relevance of the Course for Students. The course is both a relevant and timely offering as it covers key aspects of computer science not covered in any other course the school offers. As a 3rd year course students should have sufficient background and maturity to tackle this course. The course is an optional course which is part of the computational foundations major (given the theory aspects of the course) and also part of the computer engineering major (given the more applied compiler aspects of the course). There would be a mix of reasons that students would do this course, so some would do this because they are interested in the area, others to help contribute to their majors, and some to contribute to the number of COMP course they are required to complete.

Suitability of Learning Offerings. The mode of delivery was a mix of a traditional and flipped classes. In terms of student comments and the coordinator’s report the mode of delivery was not problematic. Moreover there was a number of very positive student comments that related to the lectures and tutorials. Also no resource issues were highlighted.

Suitability of Assessment. The assessment tasks that provided feedback to students over the semester were 2 assignments. The first due in Week 8 and the second due in Week 12. This feedback was provided via wattle. So the marked feedback to students from these assignment would have only been in the later part of the course. Given there was no marks associated with the tutorials one would assume there would have been a cohort of students that would not have attended and as such would not have gained much from this important learning activity.

Evaluation. From the experience of learning course evaluation results the two weakest aspect of the course were ”The teaching and learning activities (eg. lectures, tutorials, field trips) supported my learning” and ”The feedback I received during the course supported my learning”. Yet there
was many very positive comments associated with the teaching and learning activities. This would suggest there does not need to be a significant change in the course either in terms of content or in terms of the teaching mode of delivery. Rather the course coordinators should explore ways of fine tuning the course to provide better feedback and to help student understand how the teaching and learning activities do support their learning. I would suspect that with two large assignments students would believe that what they mainly needed to learn was the content/skills for completing these 2 assignments, yet the lectures and tutorials would need to be much broader than this. And hence students would not see the lectures and tutorial activities as supporting their learning as the semester progressed. So adding assessment tasks that aligns with and covers more of the course would help on both in terms of feedback and also in terms students seeing that the learning/teaching activities do support their learning.

I recommend the course explores one of:

1. associating some marked feedback with the tutorials,
2. adding lab tests or quizzes, or
3. possibly even a mid-semester exam.

These would provide better feedback to students on how they are progressing in the course and they would also help students understand how the teaching and learning activities do support their learning.