

Mathematical Institute plans in the event of swine flu pandemic

Summary

The overarching ethos within Oxford is that it's "business as usual" even if staff and student numbers attending are lower than usual.

This paper sets out the departmental teaching strategies which may need to come into effect in the event that there is a swine flu pandemic within the University. MPLS has asked that we draft contingency plans and a model from Biological sciences was distributed. It is possible that the University will institute "social distancing" whereby all lectures, meetings are cancelled temporarily. The Department might need to implement this if a significant proportion of staff and students were unwell and to this end a team has been set up to make this decision. (RAE, AGC, KG, RM, NMJW, BZ).

The purpose of this paper is to outline teaching arrangements to aim to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. This would apply predominantly to undergraduates and taught masters students.

Action for the Committee

To approve these plans, by circulation. (Approved after consultation 4/11/09).

Background

Tutorials

Each College will have an individual plan and over the course of the year, it is envisaged that no student will be unduly disadvantaged. Prolonged or serious illness of candidates is reported to examiners via the Proctors, as usual. This plan will be sent to College Offices (STs) so they know departmental plans and what we determine as "significant disruption" (see below). College offices may wish to notify the Academic Administrator (academic.admisnitrator@maths.ox.ac.uk) of any of their students who miss two or more weeks of lectures, and tutorials or classes but this would be picked up by the Proctors if no other mechanism is possible.

Part I : Firstly we consider plans if lecturers/tutors are unwell.

Lectures

We have a fairly full set of on-line lecture notes so if one or two lectures are cancelled we should note this and inform examiners, but overall no action would be needed. If possible lectures could be made up, either during the remainder of the term or in the latter part of week

0 in HT (for MT courses) and week 0 of TT (for HT courses). Each lecturer determines what is possible for them so that students may attend as many lectures as possible.

Lecturers should keep the Academic Administrator (academic.admisnitrator@maths.ox.ac.uk) informed of any cancellations and she will maintain a central record (and pass this on to MSc Administrators). She will also pass this to the respective exam board for consideration at the end of each term/start of the subsequent term. With the cancellation of one or two lectures it is unlikely that examination topics would need to be curtailed.

If 3 or 4 lectures are cancelled and it is not possible to make these up, examiners are advised to take this into account when approving/setting examination papers. In extreme circumstances it may be necessary to remove a section of examinable material (for Mods and Part A), or synopsis (for Parts B and C). Each exam board should decide based on the record of missed lectures and availability of on-line lecture notes. Candidates should be notified of any changes to examination syllabii via the usual Notices to Candidates.

If caretakers are unwell, boards will not be cleaned so students should be asked to help.

Classes

If Classes are cancelled, it may be possible for the tutor to make these up within the given term, or in the early part of the subsequent term, although it is possible that problem sheets are not all marked if, for example, the TA is unwell. In which case solutions are available and the tutor(s) should give these to the affected class(es) and encourage students to assess their own work. The TA would need to notify the tutor of their incapacity so that s/he could collect the work and look through it to help direct the class to the points where students had problems. (The tutor is NOT expected to mark the work). If the tutor is unwell but the TA has marked the work, it is hoped that the TA would give a short class (each TA demonstrates one question each class so this could still proceed). Students would need to be tolerant. Clearly, in this case the TA could informally give feedback to students on their progress and could circulate solutions. Maintaining records of attendance in Minerva is important.

Part II : Illness of Students

If students are unwell they should stay in college/in their rooms until they feel well enough to continue. This would avoid unnecessary extra contact with other students and reduce infection rates. They should notify their college office. On-line notes should be studied and problem sheets tackled as their health improves. This may be possible even if they are unwell enough to attend classes/tutorials and lectures. They should be encouraged to have at least one text book reference for each course (e-books can be very helpful if students are unable to attend a library).

If they have missed several weeks of lectures/classes, examiners would be informed of this and may take this into account although it is unlikely that adjustments would be made to formal assessments. Colleges notify Proctors as usual and examiners are thus informed.

If deadlines for submission of assessed work are missed, the student's college should as usual apply to the Proctor's office for an extension. Examiners will take this into account (as per guidance from the Proctors) when deliberating classification.

We do not envisage swine flu being very different from other illnesses (although more people may be affected).

Students should follow the University's official guidance on swine flu.

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/flu>

The section on FAQ will be very useful here. Students should report their illness to the College Senior Tutor/Dean for Undergraduates.

Msc Teaching

The paragraphs above apply.

In addition, for candidates taking Mini-projects, the dates of illness will need to be recorded and reported to assessors (at the end of each term). Assessors may then comment on this in their assessment report and Examiners take this into account when assigning a USM.

Significant Disruption

How do we classify that a candidate has had “significant disruption to their studies?” In the case where the department has been unable to make up the missed lectures and classes and where there were no on-line materials available for the courses missed, the department regards that a “significant disruption” has occurred if two or more full weeks of lectures and classes/tutorials have been missed. (It is unlikely a student has been ill for 2 weeks but that a succession of lecturers and tutors have been ill). Departmental records of students and what lectures/classes have been affected will need to be maintained. College records will also be useful. Minerva will be useful for Parts B and C. As mentioned above, each term each exam board will be notified of any missed lectures and the candidates affected.

Part III Other Teaching-Related Activities

Examinations TT 2010

Year plans for each board were set in weeks 0 and 1. Letters to setters have been prepared. To change this now would be a significant amount of work so we will not change our overall plans but will remind setters that they should be aware that illness, or if the University has to temporarily close due to swine flu, may delay the checking of papers and they should allow extra time.

Before the examination period begins, each exam board would need to take into account the likely effect of illness of lectures and whether candidates had been unduly disadvantaged. Overall, during the year, some timings of meetings might be delayed and external examiners may need to be informed, but over the whole cycle of the year, it is thought exams should be prepared and ready for Trinity Term.

Contingency plans would be necessary should a significant proportion of candidates be unable to take examinations (generally in TT but also HT for MScs). Each exam board should consider the likelihood of this happening.

Contingency plans might include the following :

- a) If necessary, another set of papers might need to be prepared (in which case other assessors would need to be appointed to assist). For Mods and Part A it may be possible to do this although we would hope not to have to.

- b) For specialised papers at Parts B and C this is unlikely to be feasible.
- c) If a sizable proportion of faculty and students are still unwell in TT, examinations could be deferred until eg September.

Admissions Dec 2009

The Admissions test runs this week (week 4). We envisage minimal disruption for the test. If candidates are unwell, and at present about 1% of the population is affected, the system will operate as it usually does in such circumstances, namely, we would hope to interview such candidates.

If key staff are unwell during week 5 (Dr Earl) this may delay marking but there is some slack in the system and marking although set for early week 5, this could be delayed until the weekend. Markers will be notified.

If candidates are unwell enough to attend interviews in week 10, we considered conducting telephone interviews (or via skype) but decided this was unlikely to be useful. In which case we will need to base decisions on the all the information available (including references, UCAS forms, admissions test, contextual information about schools etc).

It is possible that there would be a reduced number of staff able to conduct interviews. Each college would be likely to have plans in place in such eventualities. With the current system of two tutors interviewing each candidate, it is unlikely we would have major disruption. Tutors will be asked to consider the affect of illness on their individual college. If key staff are unwell in week 10, deputies will be appointed. Key staff are Dr Earl and Dr Ker.

Collections

We should be able to set these. Colleges will need to make arrangements if students are unwell.

IT

Dr Gillow will aim to ensure more IT staff are trained to use the exams database also that User Documentation is written. Overall, it is unlikely that delays to meetings will occur – most of the changes to the database are made during HT.

Support Staff plans

Rosie Mortimer and the Department's Management team have drawn up plans for support staff. These were requested by Mike Sibley during the summer of 2009.

It may not be possible to keep all the buildings open if many of the caretaking staff are unwell. We will aim to keep the main Building (St Giles') open so that lectures can run. All caretaking staff are being trained in how the main building is opened.

It is possible that administrative tasks are not completed as promptly as usual or are delayed.

Overall, we will all need to have patience.

Each group of staff and students will be informed of the above arrangements.

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