

FACULTIES OF MATHEMATICS, COMPUTER SCIENCE & STATISTICS

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE WITH UNDERGRADUATES

MEETING OF FRIDAY 6 FEBRUARY

- Present:** Dr Richard Earl (Director of Undergraduate Studies and Joint Committee for Mathematics and Philosophy; chair), Alexander Homer (MURC President, MURC Mathematics and Statistics Rep), Brigitte Stenhouse (MURC Secretary), Michael Holloway (MURC Questionnaire Rep), James Lau (MURC Outreach Rep), Ben Spells (MURC Diversity and Inclusion Rep), Haenguen Chi (MURC Treasurer), Rose Ryan Flinn (MURC Mathematics and Philosophy Rep, MURC Fourth Year Rep), Dr Neil Laws (Department of Statistics),
- In attendance:** Mrs Helen Lowe (Deputy Academic Administrator)
- Apologies for absence:** Dr Rebecca Cotton-Barratt (Admissions Co-ordinator), Ms Bulvinder Gurm (MPLS Division)

1. Meeting held on Friday 31 October 2014

(a) Minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting were **accepted**. Ben re-emphasised the point he had made in the previous meeting about fourth-year workload, which he felt was absent from the minutes.

(b) Matters arising

None.

2. Reports from the meetings of the Faculty/Teaching/Academic Committees

(a) Mathematics

(i) Strategic Review

Dr Earl noted that Ms Goodwin is coordinating a strategic review of the Department. He noted that this was concerned with high-level issues of general strategy, rather than the everyday details of the course: for instance, how well committees are working, whether there should be new degrees in new areas, or whether there should be more interaction between students and faculty.

Alex noted that this had been raised in MURC, but that there hadn't been time to go into detail on the response. He noted that MURC had agreed to form a working party to discuss the questions, which would prepare a report in time to be presented at the Seventh Week MURC Meeting. This could then be approved by MURC, and submitted to Teaching Committee in time for the Second Week meeting in Trinity Term.

It was noted that the feedback should be as representative of the wider student body as possible. It was agreed that a survey of all students could be provided on the Mathematical Institute website. It was noted that a balance had to be struck between

allowing freeform responses, and including so many open text boxes that students failed to complete the survey. Michael noted that he was due to attend training provided by OUSU on effective consultation techniques, and would ask about it.

Alex further noted that the MURC Meeting was an open meeting, so if any student wished to attend and give feedback on the final report, they could.

Dr Earl noted the Department's intention to trust MURC with the collection of student responsibility. **Action: Alex to form working party, Ms Goodwin to contact Alex with offer of support.**

(ii) Review of Prelims

Dr Earl noted that last term, after good response from faculty and students, the proposal to replace Applications with an extended Geometry course (with consequent changes to timing of other courses and minor changes to their syllabi) had been approved. He noted that, further to this, there had been agreement this term to replace Optimisation with an extended Statistics course. He noted that at a Faculty meeting in Noughth Week, there had been little disquiet about the proposed changes, and that JCCU had been broadly in favour (although the subsequent MURC meeting had been less positive).

It was noted that the course would be known as Statistics and Data Analysis, as some of the new content will not necessarily be taught from a Statistics point of view. It was noted further that this would affect the timing of papers, with the Mathematics III paper being three hours long and Mathematics V being two hours long.

(b) Statistics

Dr Laws noted that there was nothing further to add from the Faculty of Statistics.

3. MURC Business

(a) Problem Sheet Discussion Group

Alex noted that the idea of some sort of discussion group had been being raised at JCCU for some time. He noted MURC's previous suggestion had been of more of a debating group, but that this had been abandoned owing to a lack of ideas for topics. He presented his proposal, which was for a problem sheet discussion group, provisionally titled "Maths Café", although noted that the name was very much not final. The idea was that students would bring along problem sheets they were having issues with, and that this in particular would be aimed at students in Parts B and C. It was hoped that this would provide additional support for students (especially as classes, compared with tutorials, offer less-personalised support, and that students may not have colleagues on colleges studying the same course), as well as raise the profile of MURC

It was suggested that this could be introduced in Trinity Term as a pilot, perhaps with a focus on revision. Dr Earl suggested that there were no issues with this in principle, but the proposed format seemed somewhat nebulous—there might be eight people who turned up wishing to discuss eight different problems.

Dr Dyson noted that TAs had been suggesting something similar. She suggested that perhaps there could be some sort of sign-up sheet, so people knew when others were

planning to turn up. Alex noted that there had been a suggestion of different events for different broad areas of maths, but that there had been too many to make that work.

It was noted that the Mirzakhani Society offered something similar, but with slightly more focus on networking and less on collaborative working. It was noted that the Mirzakhani Society had themselves confirmed they considered the proposal different to their own offer, and were happy for both to run as long as they were not held on the same day.

It was noted that problems of different student having different deadlines would be lessened in Trinity; there would also be more incentive for students to collaborate rather than just share answers, as the imperative during revision is for the student to understand, rather than just get good marks on the problem sheet.

It was suggested that the Department could organise sessions, perhaps even for different students, independently of MURC. Additionally, MURC could run a session more along the lines of Alex's original proposal, with refreshments provided. Alex enquired about funding; it was suggested that funding along the lines of that given to the Mirzakhani Society was a possibility.

Action: Dr Earl, Dr Dyson and Alex to meet before end of term to discuss proposals. Dr Earl to raise at Teaching Committee

(b) Mark Schemes

Alex noted reports he had had from another department in the Division that bonus marks were awarded in some subjects, above the maximum allocated for the question or part-question. Dr Earl confirmed that this is not practised in Maths.

It was noted that the class descriptions for some of the projects were unclear. It was suggested in response that it was difficult to provide more specific advice when projects were general, and many things being enquired about ought to be the student's responsibility to decide upon.

Members of MURC suggested that more past projects could be provided online, with specific notes as to why particular marks had been given. It was agreed that this could be investigated.

(c) Third/Fourth Year Collections

Ben Spells reported that a number of students had raised concerns about the variation between colleges in the provision of third/fourth year collections. Some colleges offer to arrange collections for their students while others do not. Ben suggested that the department could consider offering collections as part of the intercollegiate class scheme, with collection papers made available at the end of each term and marked by the class teaching assistant at the beginning of the next term. It was agreed that the increasing variation in provision is of concern but the view of the department is that collections should not be offered for all the courses a student takes. (A college might wish to arrange collections for a course a student has found particularly difficult.) There were pedagogical reasons for this: students at Part B and C should be becoming increasingly independent and developing the ability to assess their own work. In addition there were significant logistical

difficulties with such a scheme, such as finding enough TAs willing to take on additional marking and finding a feasible mechanism for managing the payments.

Dr Earl asked whether providing specimen solutions for past papers met this need as students could mark their attempts at these papers. Ben responded that some students did not find this adequate as they wanted the opportunity to discuss problems. It was suggested that such students should take their questions to consultation sessions. It was also noted that students can approach the course lecturer, class tutor or teaching assistant with any problems they have encountered. Class tutors and TAs should be available after the class for a short while to answer questions.

(d) Recurring issues raised on questionnaires

Following on from a discussion at MURC, Michael Holloway asked what the department's policy is on lecturers who receive negative feedback on their lectures on several occasions. Dr Earl responded that he had reviewed the questionnaire returns from recent years and there was no lecturer who had received consistently poor reviews. Dr Dyson explained that if a serious problem is identified then this is addressed and she checks the questionnaire responses the following year to see whether there has been an improvement in the area of concern.

(e) MURC Website

Alex Homer reported that the MURC website is rather difficult to update and the information on it is consequently rather out of date. Helen Lowe agreed to ask whether the MURC webpages could be moved to the departmental website.

ACTION: HSL

(f) Bank Account

Alex Homer reported that an application for a new bank account had been submitted. Once approved, it would be possible to deposit the MURC money in this.

(g) Class Scheduling

It was reported at the MURC meeting that the variation in scheduling of Part B classes (some are weekly and some are fortnightly) was leading to student's having uneven workloads. Teaching Committee had discussed the problem and while it did not wish to enforce one pattern of classes it was agreed that the problem could be alleviated by ensuring that problem sheets are published well in advance of the deadline. Dr Earl would write to lecturers about this.

ACTION: RAE

4. Student Representation: Recommendations from University and OUSU working group

The meeting noted the recommendations and agreed that the department complies with the spirit of most of them already. In regard to recommendation 14, it was noted that there is not a student representative on Departmental Committee. Helen Lowe agreed to ask Sally Mullins whether a student representative is invited to this committee or the Departmental/Faculty meeting.

It was also noted that Dr Earl does not meet with all new student representatives (recommendation 6). It was felt that this was not generally necessary but could be arranged if it would be helpful in a particular year.

[Note after meeting: Departmental Committee is going to appoint a graduate student representative.]

5. Questionnaires

(a) Michaelmas Term 2014 statistical summaries

The questionnaire responses from Michaelmas term were noted and there were no particular concerns.

6. Open Days

The dates of the Open Days for 2015 were noted—these being Saturday 2nd May, Saturday 9th May, Wednesday 1st July, Thursday 2nd May, and Friday 18th September. It was noted that the MURC Outreach Rep would need to give a speech at the two in Trinity Term.

7. Lecture list for Trinity Term 2015

It was noted that the lecture list will appear on the Mathematical Institute's website <https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/members/students/lecture-lists>

8. AOB

It was suggested that MURC might like to consider appointing a Mathematics and Physics rep next year as there would be c.30 undergraduate student on the new MMathPhys course.