

FACULTIES OF MATHEMATICS & STATISTICS

JOINT CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE WITH UNDERGRADUATES

Friday 29 October 12:30pm-2:00pm in N4.01, Mathematical Institute.

Present: Prof Stuart White (Chair), Dr Richard Earl, Dr Neil Laws, Dr Vicky Neale, Dr James Munro, Rodrigo Marlasca Aparicio (MURC President), Cameron Lee (MURC Access Rep), Rachel Laing (MURC Maths and Stats Rep), Thomas Feerick.

In attendance: Sandy Patel,

Apologies:

1. Introductions

Introductions were made by individual members of the Committee

2. Meeting held on Friday 14 May 2021

(a) Minutes (attached, JCCU-21.05.14)

The minutes were approved

(b) Matters arising

It was noted that the open Teaching Committee minutes are available to all members of the department including students. Students have been informed of where to locate them.

3. Examinations Arrangements (2022).

There was a lengthy discussion of the examination arrangements for 2022, and the process by which these were reached.

It was noted that communications on exam arrangements have been released to students. Updates have come from the Teaching Committee meeting in Week 2. It was confirmed that students in parts B and C will be permitted to take one A4 sheet of notes into exams with them. The definition of one sheet of A4 paper has been agreed on in principle, and will include minimum font size and stipulated margins etc. The department will provide a template which is currently being drafted.

It was noted that the departments expect many students will want to produce handwritten notes and there will be a template for handwritten notes too. It was clarified that typed and handwritten notes can be combined as long as the notes do not exceed the margins/font size. It was reported that the sheets will not be assessed and need not be a student's own work. It was clarified that the sheets are not for assessment and do not have to make sense to anyone other than the student.

It was queried how the introduction of the A4 sheet might impact on the difficulty of examinations. It was reported that Guidance to Examiners will be published once it is agreed on. The setters do not have to make the papers google proof as they would have with open-book examinations but there will be a checklist for assessors which will also be made

available to students via the Examination Conventions in due course. The Exams will be designed to test a student's understanding of the subject, so not necessarily identical to what is on the notes and in the problem sheets. It is hoped that the process of preparing the notes will be educationally useful to the students.

It was queried whether the department has considered continuing with open-book examinations in the longer term. It was noted that the department would prefer not to make any long-term decisions during the pandemic, either about assessment or about teaching. However the department will be looking at its teaching and assessment in the light of the experiences of the last 18 months, when things are more settled to consider what if any longer term changes should be made. Any long term changes to teaching and assessment are carefully considered, and involve substantial student consultation, with full information provided to students before their course starts. That said, the general feedback from both students, examiners and assessors, was that the process of online exams was not ideal for mathematics.

It was queried whether the department could have done more to gather student feedback on the proposed new examination format before coming to a decision. It was clarified that there was not sufficient time especially as the proposed part B and C format had not yet been approved by the University. It was noted that long-term decisions have to be conveyed to students before they start the course, in those cases there is time for consultation. However, in cases where we have to make quick decisions the decisions must be based on feedback we have received historically and the general sense of how students will feel or be impacted. The members of the working group very much considered the effect on students, and all the feedback that was available from the previous summers exams.

Once the department hears back from Chairs of Examiners and Exam Schools more communication will be circulated to students. It was reported that the hope is to have the templates ready by the end of this term. However, Fridays@2 presentations will happen later.

It was suggested that if the department is going to do in-person exams it would be good for colleges to do in-person collections. It was reported that is something for colleges to decide, but it was noted students can always choose to take any online collection as a closed book exam if they wish. Moreover, in the past the Exam Schools used to allow students to sit a practice exam in the exam hall just as they made provisions for practice online exams. This allowed for students to acclimatise to the exam environment. It was reported that the hope is that the Exam Schools will offer this provision again.

It was queried whether there will be a provision if the pandemic worsens and students cannot sit exams in person. It was reported that there will be alternative arrangements in place.

4. Reports from the meetings of the Faculty/Teaching/Academic Committees (*for discussion*)
(a) Mathematics – oral report.

Richard Earl reported that the Working Group on HT Teaching will be meeting in Week 4. There will be a student representative on the working group. It was noted that in the past the University had embargoed the paperwork which meant we could not have a student representative. It could still be embargoed but the plan is for this to go ahead. It was queried whether the working group could have more student representatives as Rodrigo (the current representative) is currently a 4th year Undergraduate student. This request will be put forward to the Chair of the Working Group.

Post meeting note: A second MURC representative on HT teaching working group has been agreed, though only one MURC representative attended these meetings.

It was reported that Mid-term questionnaires have been released. It was requested that student members of the committee encourage other students to complete the surveys. The questionnaire is adapted from what is normally circulated in terms of covering matters such as how well students can hear/view the lecturer etc. If there is a concern about course itself, that students are not able to directly discuss with a lecturer, then students can email the Student Hotline.

It was noted that some students would like to see more online teaching in terms of lecture recordings, but others felt strongly that lectures should be in person. At present student opinion on this topic appears to be polarised.

It was reported that students would like to keep previously recorded lectures online but it was noted that this could cause confusion when lecturers change. It was reported that recorded lectures could be taken down when the lecturer changes as a rule or it could be up to the lecturers to decide. The topic is still under consideration by the department.

It was noted the department does intend to carefully consider the lessons learnt from online teaching. This is expected to be a long term process in which student views and feedback will be sought.

(b) Statistics – oral report.

It was reported that the Examiners Reports were discussed in teaching committee. It was noted that the University had advised that the classifications remain broadly in line with previous year's results. It was noted that for Mathematics and Statistics this was broadly similar to previous years.

It was reported that for individual classes there were a lot more sign-ups in October compared to registrations in the summer, which led to last minute allocations of tutors and TA's. This also proved true for courses offered by the Mathematical Institute. This matter is a cause of concern to both departments.

It was agreed that Statistics Teaching Committee minutes will also be circulated to JCCU

5. MURC Business

(a) Pronounced emails

It was requested that all faculty and staff who correspond with students be advised to state their pronouns in their email signatures. While it was understood that this could not be a requirement it was suggested that this could be a recommendation.

It was agreed that the MURC representatives would put together a brief paper to pass onto the departments EDI Committee for discussion.

Post Meeting Note: This paper was taken by EDI committee in week 4.

6. Oral report on 2021 exams (for discussion).

It was noted that the Afforded Teaching Committee meeting to discuss examiners reports was postponed from week 0 and has not yet taken place. Examiners reports will be published at some point following this meeting (currently scheduled for week 5), and any detailed discussion on the reports can be taken at a future meeting of JCCU.

It was reported that Richard Earl responded to an open letter from Part A student and addressed various concerns raised. It was reported that the data showed that roughly as expected, 3 of the 13 papers had been the hardest paper in the last 4 years, and that the scaling process appears to have worked

It was reported there were a few Inspira problems outside the department's control, including one paper being released on Inspira in error ahead of the scheduled date for the exam. A new paper was then set in a matter of days through the hard work of faculty and staff.

7. Questionnaires (for report and discussion)

It was reported that at the end of the last academic year an end of year questionnaire was circulated for feedback. The feedback was reviewed for the working group over the summer and also to provide guidance on various topic. The feedback will be prepared for review to potentially be revisited during JCCU in Hilary Term. There will be more questionnaires at the end of this term which can be discussed next term. Conversations on the format, online or electronic questionnaires still need to take place. It was noted that electronic feedback responses are low. It was suggested that administering the questionnaires via Moodle might help response rates, especially as students will not specifically have to look for them.

8. Student Bulletin (feedback requested).

It was reported that feedback on the Student Bulletin is welcome and it is useful for the department to know what students find to be useful.

It was noted that the Bulletin was considered to be useful last year when informing/updating students on the format of exams etc. However, the information is broad and suitable for a range of people and because of that valuable information might get lost in the more general information. It was suggested that more generalised/subject specific might be helpful.

It was suggested that maybe the Bulletin is circulated too frequently and that it could be circulated on a bi-weekly period. This would allow for more information over a longer time period. However, this could mean that some important deadlines pass, i.e. for job/Phd opportunities before the next Bulletin is circulated.

Another suggestion was that the Bulletin could be more focused on the cohort/year of the students.

It was noted that students generally consider the Bulletin to be enjoyable to read.

9. Open Days in 2021-22 (*for report*)

It was reported that in 2021 the open days were online again. It was noted that the open day in September was less attended than last year, possibly because people are tired of online events or possibly because we now have more information available online. The 2022 open days will be in person again, James Munro is looking into hybrid options so people overseas can join in. It was reported that student participation would be much appreciated. There is some discussion about one of the big open days changing to a Saturday but the current expectation is that the dates continue as usual.

It was suggested that online events are never as inspiring as in person events. If other institutions are offering in-person and we are not then they may choose the other institution over Oxford.

The question of access and the role the open day plays in promoting access. It was noted that this is a complicated issue and while the open days do play a part there are a lot of other outreach initiatives that the department participates in such as UNIQ.

10. Any further discussion on examination arrangements 2022.

No further discussion.

11. AOB. (Please inform the chair --- stuart.white@maths.ox.ac.uk --- in advance, of any AOB items).

It was queried whether the undergraduate students could have access to Microwaves. It was report that When previously asked the answer was no. But might be worth querying seeing as the café is closed.

It was reported that other student committees in the department had made similar requests and that Sandy Patel will query this with the relevant people in the department.

Action: SP & SW