

Mathematics Undergraduate Representative Committee

Second Meeting of Hilary Term • Minutes of Meeting

5th March 2014

Present: Alex Homer (President, Maths and Statistics Rep, Oriel College Rep), Brigitte Stenhouse (Secretary, Publicity and Careers Rep, Somerville College Rep), Haengeun Chi (Treasurer, New College Rep), Rose Ryan Flinn (Maths and Philosopher Rep, Fourth Year Rep), Ben Spells (Diversity and Inclusion Rep), Liam Stigant (IT Rep, Jesus College Rep), Michael Holloway (Questionnaire Rep, St Hugh's College Rep), Charlie Hutchings (First Year Rep), James Herring (Christ Church Rep), Kathryn Poole (Hertford College Rep), Jacob Muller (The Queen's College Rep), Nick Williams (Worcester College Rep), Cicely Robinson, Toby Scadding, Oliver Vipond

Apologies for absence: James Lau (Outreach Rep)

The meeting commenced at 1:05 pm.

Minutes and Matters Arising

1. Minutes from previous meeting

The minutes from the previous meeting were **accepted**.

2. Class scheduling

3. Provision of textbooks

4. Student representation on committees

These items were deferred to a future meeting.

General Business

5. College Rep elections

It was noted that Niloy Biswas had resigned his position as St John's College Rep.

James Herring, Alex Homer and Brigitte Stenhouse resigned their positions as Christ Church Rep, Oriel College Rep and Somerville College Rep, respectively (while keeping any other positions they held).

Nominations were opened for the position of Oriel College Rep. Mike Vuu nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Mike Vuu was **unanimously elected**. Mike therefore assumed the position of Oriel College Rep.

Nominations were opened for the position of Somerville College Rep. Cicely Robinson nominated herself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Cicely Robinson was **unanimously elected**. Cicely Robinson therefore assumed the position of Somerville College Rep.

Nominations were opened for the position of Christ Church Rep. Toby Scadding nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Toby Scadding was **unanimously elected**. Toby Scadding therefore assumed the position of Christ Church Rep.

Nominations were opened for the position of St John's College Rep. Oliver Vipond nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Oliver Vipond was **unanimously elected**. Oliver Vipond therefore assumed the position of St John's College Rep.

Nominations were opened for the position of Pembroke College Rep. Edwin Reynolds nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Edwin Reynolds was **unanimously elected**. Edwin Reynolds therefore assumed the position of Pembroke College Rep.

Nominations were opened for the position of Lincoln College Rep. Charlie Hutchings nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Charlie Hutchings was **unanimously elected**. Charlie Hutchings therefore assumed the position of Lincoln College Rep.

6. Reports from Departmental Committees

Alex reported from the meeting of the Mathematics Teaching Committee that had taken place on Wednesday. He noted that that Committee had discussed whether or not to change Part C classification to Pass/Merit/Distinction, and if so where the grade boundaries should lie. It was noted that the Department was in favour of such a change if permitted by the University, but that there was more discussion concerning whether the Pass/Merit boundary should be at 60% or 65% (and similarly whether the pass mark should be raised to 50% from 40%).

Alex noted that the Department had adjusted certain restrictions on paper choices at Parts A, B and C. At Part A, it was now permitted for students to take a sixth long option, with the lowest two UMS marks counting with half the weight to the overall Part A mark—this option was to be aimed primarily at first-class students. At Parts B and C, students were now allowed to take up to four units from the schedule of available units outside the Department, an increase from two; they were not to be permitted to take more than two from each of the lists of Statistics, Computer Science and Other units, however.

As an aside, it was noted that some of the issues above had been brought to the attention of MURC at such a time that a decision would be made before MURC, or JCCU, would next meet to discuss student views. It was noted that members of the Administrative Committee (Exec and College Reps) had been consulted through the "murc-members" mailing list; however, it was suggested that this could be raised at JCCU if it became a problem.

Alex noted that the Part C Networks course was now to be assessed by mini-project. It was noted that this was already the case for MFoCS students, who are permitted to take the course, but that the deadline was in Eleventh Week of Hilary Term; the deadline for undergraduates was to be the same. It had been noted at Teaching Committee that undergraduates would therefore not necessarily be in Oxford when the deadline was reached; however, it had been noted that holding assessments at different times could cause issues with marking. It had been suggested that students not in Oxford could submit their work by courier. It was noted that some departments (such as Chemistry) make provisions for extended terms, and, if significantly many courses were to move to deadlines during the vac, MURC could push for similar provisions.

Ben gave a report from JCCU, on the issue of third- and fourth-year Collections. It was noted that the idea had been dismissed, both for logistical reasons and ideological ones (for the latter, that students should be able to judge their own work by that time). It was suggested that the Outreach Rep no longer comment at Open Days and other events that the education provided was independent of college, as whether or not Collections were provided in later years constituted a difference.

Alex also noted from JCCU that the Department had approved the idea of a problem sheet discussion group, and that he was due to meet with Dr Earl and Dr Dyson to discuss the logistics.

Alex noted that there was nothing to report from the Statistics Academic Committee other than what had been discussed at Maths Teaching Committee.

Rose gave a report from the Joint Committee of Maths and Philosophy. She noted that examiners' reports and admission statistics had been discussed. She also noted that the meeting had discussed the plans for students to be allowed to take a greater number of options at Part A, and that the mechanics of how this would work the Maths and Philosophy degree had been discussed.

Alex noted that the MPLS Undergraduate Joint Consultative Forum had been postponed, and consequently had not yet taken place.

7. Fourth year review

Rose noted that, as last year, students had been consulted for their views on the amended Part C. There had been very few responses via email, but those who had responded had noted a disconnect between problem sheets and lectures. She noted that there had been a lower proportion of responses with extremely negative comments.

It was noted that the issue should again be raised at JCCU, and that an action plan should be devised.

Action: to be raised at JCCU. Alex to consider possible remedies to contribute to an action plan.

It was noted that students should be aware that they are not expected to finish the problem sheets. In response, it was suggested that, as the entire problem sheet was examinable, this could cause issues for students who hadn't completed a question that was related to one on the exam.

8. Strategic Review

Alex noted that the MURC working party on the Strategic Review, consisting of himself, Michael and James, had met twice to discuss MURC's contributions to the Review. Alex thanked the other members of the working party for their efforts.

It was noted that a survey, accompanied by a prize draw for gift vouchers as an incentive, had been carried out of students in the Department, which had received around 150 responses. These had been used to answer all of the questions provided by the Department, except for those on Access and Admissions—questions on these issues had not been included in the survey, to keep the survey to a manageable length and out of concerns of bias (students admitted to Oxford would presumably be more likely to be happy with the system).

It was noted that two questions had been added to those provided by the Department, on the subject of the format of lectures and classes; this was due to the large amount of feedback received on these topics, which was not covered under any other question.

It was noted that the suggestion in the report of providing printed solutions to problems in classes had been rejected two years previously, for the reasons that students would not attend classes, that students would pass solutions down between years, and that it might encourage the idea that there is a single correct answer when multiple approaches might be appropriate. It was noted in response that the Department of Statistics does provide solutions in this way. It was agreed to raise the issue again at JCCU. **Action: to be raised at JCCU.**

It was noted that some feedback had been received that considered positive discrimination, as present in the Mirzakhani Society, not to help resolve gender issues in the Department. It was noted that MURC appreciates the work done by the Mirzakhani Society, and that the language included in the report had been chosen accordingly.

Alex asked for opinions on the Access and Admissions issues included in the report. On the question of what was effective and what could be improved about the admissions process, it was felt that it was a positive that students have interviews at more than one college. It was noted that some interviews were carried out by DPhil students, and enquired as to whether these counted or were simply for training purposes. Separately, it was suggested that more training about unconscious bias was necessary. It was noted that questions were sometimes recycled, which meant that should a school save a bank of interview questions that its students were asked, students from those schools would have an advantage.

It was felt that the MAT was a positive feature of the system, as it tested students on written work similar to that at university, which is often vastly different to that undertaken at school; it was felt that it was good that the university had have more than just A-level (or equivalent) results available. It was also felt that the use of this to cut down numbers for interviews allowed for more comprehensive interviews with those selected.

It was noted that some tutors had remarked that the first problem sheet could be taken as indicative of later results, even Finals. As such, it was suggested that interviews where the question is seen before the interview could be of use, with students presenting a question in the interview. It was noted that this was already done in some colleges.

Alex also asked for opinions on effective ways to engage potential students, and on whether there were any particular groups on which recruitment effort should be focused. It was asked what access work already happened, and Alex gave a list (including UNIQ, work with the FMSP and UKMT, the Mathemagicians, public lectures and a Year 9 Girls in Maths conference).

Alex noted an opinion from the student consultation exercise that not enough access work was done outside the South of England. Separately, it was suggested that the Department could host the European Girls' Mathematical Olympiad, and that more focused events could be held for people belonging to other minority groups (e.g. BAME). An opinion was raised that UKMT may not be a good indicator of performance at university maths, but could be a good way to engage students.

On the subject of social media, it was noted that there was an OxDTweet account for Maths. It was felt that a blog might be a good way to link current and prospective students, whereas most contact currently is between the University and schools. The idea of a Departmental alternative prospectus was mooted. **Action: Alex to update Strategic Review report in light of the comments above**

9. Discussion group

Alex reported that JCCU had been in favour of the proposed discussion group idea. These were to be principally run by the Department, with the suggestion made that revision consultation sessions could potentially be scheduled to complement these, so people could attempt the questions and then go to a corresponding consultation session. It was felt that MURC could also run an event that would be more social (perhaps with provided refreshments) and more generalist. Alex asked members to email him with any suggestions.

10. Stress in ninety-minute exams

Alex reported that he had been asked by Dr Earl to consult MURC on whether ninety-minute exams caused undue stress, based on feedback from a student. The student had felt that ninety minutes wasn't necessarily long enough, especially when the question required the candidate to spot a trick to answer it.

Some students felt that the shorter exams caused less stress, rather than more (being over more quickly); however, others felt that the exams at Parts B and C were supposed to be under less time pressure, which they felt wasn't the case. **Action: Alex to report mixed feedback to Dr Earl**

11. Diversity and Inclusion

Ben thanked Katherine, Brigitte, Haengeun, Michael, James and Rose for their input to the D&I report. He noted that his review had highlighted big issues with gender balance, and reports of comments like "You are good for a girl" being made. The report had also been raised in the Good Practice Steering Group.

He noted that the review had identified issues that needed action; in particular, that more could be done on BAME issues, and that someone in the Department, perhaps a student, could be trained as a peer supporter.

12. Open Days

James noted that the Departmental Open Days were taking place in the next term, and encouraged MURC members to volunteer to be available to talk with prospective students. He asked members to email him with suggested items to include in his talk to prospective students.

13. Options Fair

Alex noted that the Options Fair had been moved earlier in the term, following feedback last year that it had been too late (and in the middle of exams); it would be taking place on the Friday of

Fourth Week of Trinity Term. He noted, however, that the deadline for Part C course registration was now to be a week earlier, at the end of Ninth Week (Part B was to remain the same).

14. Website

It was noted that Liam and Alex had met with Departmental IT Staff, and that MURC pages were now under construction on the Department's site. It was noted that the web address was somewhat unwieldy, but that a URL-shortening service could be used to give an alternative.

15. Bank account

Haengeun noted that the bank account application was now nearly complete, and was just awaiting confirmation of details from some of the signatories.

16. Rep for Arts Committee

Alex noted that he had been contacted by Dr Szendrői to ask if MURC wanted to delegate a student to the Department's Arts Committee. Alex noted that he felt it would be better if someone other than the President were to be this delegate. It was agreed that MURC would delegate a member on a temporary basis, until it could be agreed whether a new member of the Exec was needed for the role. It was agreed to elect this delegate, who would serve as delegate until further notice.

Nominations were opened for the position of Delegate to the Arts Committee. Nick Williams nominated himself, and an election was duly held.

Result: Nick Williams was **unanimously elected**. Nick Williams therefore assumed the role of Delegate to the Arts Committee. **Action: Alex to notify Dr Szendrői of the election. Nick to attend the Arts Committee and report to MURC as necessary.**

17. National Student Survey

Alex noted that he had been asked by Helen Lowe to encourage students to complete the National Student Survey, as the University and Department were below the threshold required for their results to be displayed. Alex asked College Reps to encourage members of their colleges to complete the survey. **Action: College Reps to encourage students to complete the survey.**

18. Any other business

Exec Members leaving Oxford

Alex noted that several members of the Exec were now in Fourth Year, and would therefore be unable to complete their terms. He asked any such members wishing to resign their posts in the Trinity Term meeting to contact him.

There being no further business, the meeting was concluded at 2:00 pm.

BS/AH 06/05/2014