**Martinmas semester Report**

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School of Biology President, 2020-2021

# **Introduction**

This report details my activities as the School of Biology President during the Martinmas Semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The report is organized as follows:

* Statutory responsibilities, including EduCom, Class Rep Elections, and more.
* Academic activities, particularly the BSET working group, Panopto Parties, and Teaching Committee.
* Wellbeing and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion initiatives, including BEDI Committee, LGBT+ STEM Week, and more.
* Careers, including the internship panel, School Presidents’ Advisory Group, and more.
* Social and Other Activities, such as Freshers support and socials.
* Candlemas Semester Plans, including the PsychNeuroBio Conference, a Science Communications event, and more.

When I was elected as School President at the beginning of last March, like everyone else, I had a very different picture in my mind of how this academic year was going to go. Issues like making use of the School’s physical spaces and implementing lecture capture were priorities in my manifesto. In light of the pandemic and other global events, I made significant changes to my agenda. One of my main roles this semester has become communicating with staff regarding the provision of dual delivery teaching and issues with student wellbeing during the pandemic. Furthermore, I have made Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion a priority and have played a role in initiatives supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, women in science, and have developed a strong working relationship with the BAME Biology Team. Furthermore, I have put in effort to make sure that initiatives from my manifesto - like revision of BSET tutorials and SSCC continuity improvement - continue despite the pandemic.

Taking on the role of School President during this very strange academic year has been a learning experience, but I am ready to hit the ground running in Semester 2. Collaboration with other student leaders – particularly the other EduCom members, Class Reps, and the BAME Biology Team – has been a highlight of my term and I look forward to continuing these working relationships.

# **Statutory Responsibilities**

As the School of Biology President, my essential role involves governance, collaboration with other academic representatives, and representing Biology students through a variety of channels within the Students’ Association and the School. This section of the report includes my statutory responsibilities including attending Education Committee, communicating with the student body, and working alongside the Class Reps. Other statutory committee roles, like my position on the EDI Committee, are detailed in the sections of the report that relate to each committee’s mission.

Education Committee (EduCom)

EduCom is chaired by the Director of Education and is attended by School and Faculty Presidents and Language Convenors. EduCom meets weekly for an hour and a half, wherein we discuss education-related issues firstly as faculties and then as a larger group.

By far the most prevalent topic of discussion at EduCom has been the student experience during the pandemic, specifically pertaining to subjects such as academic policies, mental health support, and Can-Do initiatives. Other topics of discussion have included environmental policies, the inclusive curriculum audit, and events put on in collaboration between Schools such as LGBT+ STEM week. The minutes from EduCom meetings can be found [here](https://www.yourunion.net/representation/academic/education-committee/).

School Presidents’ Forum

The School Presidents’ Forum occurs twice per semester, and is attended by EduCom members, the University Proctor, the Dean of Science, and the Dean of Arts & Divinity.

As with EduCom, the topic of the University response to the pandemic dominated discussions at School Presidents’ Forum. In these meetings we especially focused on etiquette and logistics for dual delivery and mental health provisions. The minutes from School Presidents’ Forums are also available on the [Students’ Association website.](https://www.yourunion.net/representation/academic/education-committee/)

Meetings with the Director of Teaching

I meet with the School of Biology’s Director of Teaching, Dr Iain Matthews, every fortnight. In these meetings, I update Dr Matthews regarding the activities of myself and relevant student groups and provide feedback regarding the planning and implementation of dual delivery and online teaching during the pandemic. Specific subjects discussed have included the importance of practical teaching, the utility of lecture capture, staff-student communication, and the results of surveys such as the Students’ Association survey on in-person teaching.

Emails

At the start of each week, I send out “Monday updates” to all students enrolled in BL-coded modules. These emails contain job postings, links for surveys run by the University and the Union, and advertisements for events being held by myself, societies, or other groups within the University. In situations where there are time-sensitive memos, or there is simply a lot going on, I may end up constructing several School-wide emails per week.

Class Representative Elections and Training

I advertised and managed the election portal for Class Rep Elections at both the postgraduate and undergraduate level. Happily, all positions - save one PGR position - were filled, and most positions were contested.

I consulted with the 2019-2020 PGR Class Rep and the Directors of Postgraduate Teaching and Research to devise a new setup for PGR Class Reps. This year, instead of having one PGR representative for the whole School of Biology, there was one PGR position for each of the three research centers. Only two of the three positions were filled, but I think having all three available is useful as this system divides up the work and recognizes that the experience of the students in different research centers may vary significantly.

I also attended Class Rep Training, which was organized in a different format this year. At this meeting, the Class Reps and I discussed everyone’s goals for this year and completed the assignment of the Class Rep expansion packs.

SSCC

I chaired the SSCC for MSc and BSc students and staff. In speaking with the PGR students, we agreed that them meeting with their faculty independently was most effective. Typically, the School of Biology has SSCCs at the end of semester. This year, the Director of Teaching and I agreed that it would be beneficial to move up the SSCC a few weeks in order to get ahead of any problems before revision break, and to better distinguish between SSCC questionnaires and MEQs. I believe the move a few weeks earlier was useful.

Discussion at the SSCC was largely around dual delivery, with Class Reps stating their fondness of opportunities for practical teaching and interactions with staff. I circulated the minutes from the SSCC, and at the end of the year will compile this and last semester’s SSCC minutes to a summary form so that next year’s Class Reps can be aware of what issues might be recurring.

# **Academics**

BSET Working Group

The BSET tutorials were developed to allow students to develop their professional and academic skills and to allow them to network with faculty and students from the School of Biology. The previous School President initiated a working group to review the BSET tutorials, and as BSET reform was also in my manifesto I was happy to carry on the group this year. We jointly attended the first meetings of the working group, consisting of four staff members and ourselves, during the summer. Recognizing the connection between BSET and EDI, when the new academic year began, I asked members of the BAME Biology Team to fill the open student position left by the previous School President.

The group discussed the purpose of BSET tutorials, potential areas for improvement, and developed and circulated surveys to students and staff to collect feedback on BSET. Areas of concern include the uniformity of students’ experiences, the type of content delivered, and the tutorials’ organization.

I am currently working on compiling the survey results. Based on these results the working group will construct a list of recommendations for the future of tutorials in the School at the start of Semester 2.

Panopto Parties

For sub-honours students, I circulated sign-ups for “Panopto Parties”, which were small study groups intended to encourage students to watch lectures together or discuss lecture content. I put each group of 10 people into a channel on Teams. Approximately 150 first year students and about a dozen second year students signed up to the scheme. Many students ended up watching the lectures on their own, but others did make use of it to ask each other about course content.

Teaching Committee

As the student representative on the Teaching Committee within the School of Biology, I attended a Teaching Committee Meeting early in autumn about changes to the structure of third year exams considering the transition to an online format. I emphasized how long each section of the exam tends to take students and how the online format does not significantly impact this.

# **Wellbeing and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion**

BEDI Committee

As School President, I sit on the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Committee within the School of Biology as a student representative. I attended three meetings of the BEDI Committee in Semester 1 and over the winter break – missing one due to an exam – where I provided input and updates on a variety of initiatives, particularly the Open Discussion on Racism in Academia and LGBT+ STEM Week.

EDI: Race and Ethnicity

Over the summer, Alcira Hava wrote an open letter to the Principal asking for the University of St Andrews to take action to eliminate racism within the University and to take a stand against racism on a wider scale. Myself and my predecessor both signed this letter, and I subsequently attended meetings initiated by other student leaders to discuss what changes could be made to make the University a more inclusive environment.

In collaboration with the BAME Biology Team, Prof. Laland, and other planning committee members, I helped plan the Open Discussion on Racism in Academia. I then chaired the event, which had approximately 115 attendees including staff and students. The Open Discussion, I believe, was successful in that it provided a platform for people who had experienced racism in St Andrews to share their stories, informed those who had underestimated the magnitude of the issue of racism in St Andrews, and informed some concrete changes that could be made within the School.

I collaborated with the BAME Biology Team on their Lunch and Learn Event. This in-person event took place in the Can-Do Marquee, and over lunch we discussed the topic “How could we manage and respond to microaggressions?”. In addition to attending the event, I contributed by booking the venue and advertising.

EDI: LGBTQIA+

LGBT+ STEM Week was an event to celebrate, showcase, and support LGBTQIA+ individuals in STEM through a series of academic and social events. This event was initiated and led by the Physics and Astronomy President, Sarah, and was put on in a collaborative effort between the School Presidents and Faculty President from the Faculty of Science and Medicine. The STEM Presidents collaborated to devise an overarching plan for the week. I provided updates on the event to the School of Biology EDI Committee, supported Sarah in meetings with the EDI lead for the Faculty of Science and Medicine, formulated the idea of a gingerbread decorating social together with other Presidents, advertised the week to Biology students, and took a shift overseeing the gingerbread decorating session. Over 250 students took part in the event throughout the week and we received very positive feedback about how the event helped people feel accepted.

Student Wellbeing Advisory Group

I sit on the Schools’ Wellbeing Advisory Group (SWAG) which addresses wellbeing issues. Alongside several School Presidents from each faculty, SWAG is chaired by the Science and Medicine Faculty President and includes representatives from the Union, Student Services, and the Wellbeing Subcommittee. Issues discussed on this committee have included access to mental health support, lecture capture, the academic alert system, and support for students with disabilities during dual delivery teaching.

# **Careers**

In addition to organizing my own careers events, I am regularly in contact with the Biology Careers Advisor, Julie McLellan, at the Careers Centre. Furthermore, I am supported by the Careers Class Rep, Sarah Willich. Sarah in turn is in communication with the School’s Careers Link, Dr Barbosa. These channels of communication are vital to avoid duplicate efforts and make sure that all students’ needs are met.

Careers Survey

I created and distributed a Careers Survey to all biology students in order to gauge students’ interest in Career Events. The survey confirmed students’ wide variety of interests, and that students at all levels were interested in attending events, which I have tried to keep in mind while planning events.

SHINE

I agreed to be a UG representative for the Scottish Health & Innovation Network for Entrepreneurship (SHINE). This has entailed advertising their events to Biology undergraduates, including their panel on “Entrepreneurial Solutions toward Addressing COVID-19”.

SPAG

From the Education Committee, I was co-opted to be one of the Faculty Reps on the School Presidents’ Advisory Group (SPAG). This group, chaired by the Arts and Divinity Faculty President, aims to improve the relationship between the School Presidents and the Careers Centre. During SPAG’s three meetings in Semester 1, we discussed the structure of communications between the Careers Centre, Schools, and School Presidents, how COVID-19 has impacted job prospects, and best practice for the Careers Centre’s student outreach.

Internship Event

I organized and hosted an internship panel, where student volunteers gave brief presentations on their internship experiences, including the application process and what their job entailed. The six presenters included three Class Reps, students studying a wide range of subjects, and both UG and PG students. Approximately 50 people attended the event.

# **Social and other activities**

Support for Freshers

* WhatsApp chat**:** Over the summer and up until the election of Class Reps, I checked the Biology Freshers’ WhatsApp chat to answer questions relating to academics and the School.
* Academic Fayre:I helped run the School of Biology booth at the Academic Fayre, providing the Freshers with a student perspective on academic matters.
* Introductory Video:I recorded a brief Panopto presentation for all students, which was particularly relevant for First Years as it was intended to be their introduction to academic representation, to introduce myself and the Class Rep system.
* Our Planet Screening and Social:In October I hosted a screening of an episode of *Our* *Planet* in the Can Do Marquee to give the first years the chance to network. The event was booked to capacity and it was a very valuable opportunity to get to know some of the new students.

Skribblio Social

During revision, I hosted a Skribblio (online Pictionary) social with a Biology theme to encourage students to take a break from studying and to help combat loneliness.

Use of the School of Biology Facebook Page

In my manifesto I stated that I wanted to create a digital events bulletin board. In lieu of a formal website, I obtained access to the School of Biology Facebook page so that I could create events that would be visible to all students. Additionally, I adopted the use of weekly emails containing memos from societies.

# **Semester 2 Plans**

* Science Communication Event:I have arranged for one of the hosts of the *Nature* podcast to give a talk about his experience in science journalism. I have begun publicizing the event, which will take place in the evening of February 11th.
* Alumni Panel:Sarah Willich, the Careers Rep for the School of Biology, has organized a panel event with a group of alumni to talk about their diverse experiences. I will be publicizing this event and providing Sarah with any assistance she may require.
* CIEEM Event:The Careers Centre has been in touch with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM), a professional body for Ecologists and Environmental Managers. Sarah Willich and I met with the Careers Centre and a representative from CIEEM to discuss what content would interest students and I will help promote the event.
* PsychNeuroBio Conference:Myself and the School of Psychology & Neuroscience President, Lindsay, will be hosting the second annual PsychNeuroBio Conference in Week 8. The theme of the conference is “Impact”. We will open the call for abstracts for this event in Week 1. The event will be entirely online and consist of live sessions in addition to a poster gallery to maximize the number of students whose work can be showcased.
* DiverSTEM: Led by Sean Nwachukwu, Chemistry Class Rep, the STEM School Presidents and other student leaders are putting on a speaker series in late March called DiverSTEM: Celebrating POC in Science.
* Women in Science:The BEDI Committee will be putting on a lecture event for International Day of Women and Girls in Science. The event was going to have to be postponed due to mitigating circumstances but is currently going to go ahead. I have agreed to help with publicizing and organizing the Teams event.
* PG Medicine Event:As part of my manifesto, I wanted to put on an event for students hoping to study PG Medicine. This event was originally planned for November but had to be pushed back due to difficulty acquiring speakers, and I am hoping to be able to put it on later in the spring using contacts I acquired in Semester 1.
* Continuing to advocate for students’ needs during the pandemic:As part of my statutory duties, I will continue to spend time advocating for students’ needs, especially in this difficult time when the new phase of the pandemic has further interrupted peoples’ studies.

Thank you for your time. If you have questions about the contents of this report, or would like to get in touch with feedback or ideas for initiatives within the School of Biology, please do not hesitate to email me at [biologypresident@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:biologypresident@st-andrews.ac.uk), or to get in touch with your Class Reps!

All the best,

Brynne