Lucy Matthews

Modern langages school president 2020-21

School of modern languages – semester one report

INTRODUCTION

Hello! I’m Lucy, 5th year French, Spanish, and Arabic student and 2020-21 School of Modern Languages President.

This report details everything I have been doing since my election as President of the School of Modern Languages, from my takeover in the summer to the end of Semester One. This year has not been as expected and as a result my time has been spent trying to improve the student experience during the pandemic, rather than on some of my manifesto points. However, I am happy with what I have achieved throughout the semester, both in terms of my plans coming into the role, and everything else that comes along with the role (which goes far beyond my manifesto!). The report will be split into the following sections:

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1. ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION

A. The role

The role of President encompasses anything and everything from sitting on several committees, organising social and careers events, answering (hundreds of) emails, addressing student concerns, collecting student feedback, and relaying this feedback to staff in the department. Essentially, I serve as a link between the staff and the students in the School, all with a view to improving the student experience.

Our structure is a little different in Modern Languages to the other schools since we house 7 departments. To help me represent all the students in the SoML, we have a convenor for each of the departments. I have been blessed with an amazing team of convenors this year, and we meet regularly to discuss different things we can be doing to improve things for students in the school and to borrow ideas from other departments.

It’s difficult trying to manage the workload alongside my degree, and to keep track of what is going in across all 7 departments, but the convenor team have really helped me with this.

B. Meetings

The thing that probably takes up most of the time that I dedicate to my role is meetings. I am in regular contact with the Head of School (HoS) and I meet regularly with the Director of Teaching (DoT), who is my main contact. Aside from that, I attend several ad hoc meetings and sit on various committees which meet regularly throughout the semester.

**Teaching Committee**

In this meeting, chaired by the DoT and attended by all the Heads of Departments and other key staff, we discuss issues facing teaching in the SoML and my role is to offer the student perspective. Recently we have been discussing issues surrounding synchronous teaching and how feedback is listened to and acted upon in the School.

**School Officer’s Committee**

This meeting is chaired by the HoS and is attended by all the key members of staff in the School. Again, I offer the student view on issues faced by the School on a more general scale. We discuss anything from partnerships with other universities to equality and diversity updates and exam arrangements.

**Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee**

Unfortunately, I have only been able to attend this meeting once due to having class at the same time. However, we discuss interesting topics such as the gender balance in the SoML and decolonising the curriculum.

**Convenor Meeting**

The convenors and I meet every two weeks on a Monday so that I can relay information from all the above meetings to them, and to discuss ideas to implement on a school-wide basis.

**Dual delivery Working Group**

Following concerns with synchronous teaching particularly in a language context, I joined a working group with the DoT and other members of staff to brainstorm ideas on how to improve provisions. We hope to implement some of the ideas we have discussed in semester two.

**Education Committee**

Every Thursday, all the School Presidents and Convenors meet with the Faculty Presidents and the Director of Education to discuss what we have been doing during the week and the challenges we have faced. We also help each other by discussing how our Schools are dealing with different issues.

**School Presidents’ Forum**

Twice a semester the School Presidents meet with the Proctor and both of the Deans to discuss various issues facing students. This semester’s meetings have obviously been based on dual delivery concerns. This is a great opportunity for us to ask for answers and explanations on decisions that affect students from senior management at the university.

C. SSCCs and Student Feedback

**Student Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC)**

In Modern Languages we have 8 SSCC meetings – one for each department at undergraduate level, and one postgraduate meeting. Prior to these meetings we collect feedback from students which we then discuss with module coordinators with a view to making changes to improve modules.

The convenors chair their department’s SSCC and I chair the PG one. It would be (almost) impossible for me to try and attend all of them, so this semester I attended Spanish, French, German, and Russian. Next semester, I will attend Italian, Arabic and Persian, and Comparative Literature.

**Student feedback**

This year, I made a change in how we collect feedback from students. Previously, the class reps had passed out pieces of paper with a link to an online survey after classes. I wanted to change this both for pandemic reasons and to be more sustainable. So, I created online forms for collecting feedback with a QR code displayed in classes (both online and in-person). We received a very high turnout, but there were some teething problems with the QR codes, specifically the fact that the form was only designed for feedback on one module, meaning that students would usually only fill out their core modules. Unfortunately, this meant that non-compulsory honours content modules received much less feedback. However, next semester the convenors and I will be looking at making a few tweaks to improve the process.

Similarly, SoML has received a lot of feedback saying that student views are not listened to nor acted on, in recent years. In teaching committee, we discussed that a lot of this issue stems from changes that are made not being publicised correctly, or where changes are not possible for a rational reason, this is not explained to students. Most of this is due to it being unlikely that students read SSCC minutes. So, to combat this I came up with using the SWAY platform to show short succinct pieces of information, relevant to each year group. The convenors and I will also be looking at how we can continue to improve in this area.

D. Student reps

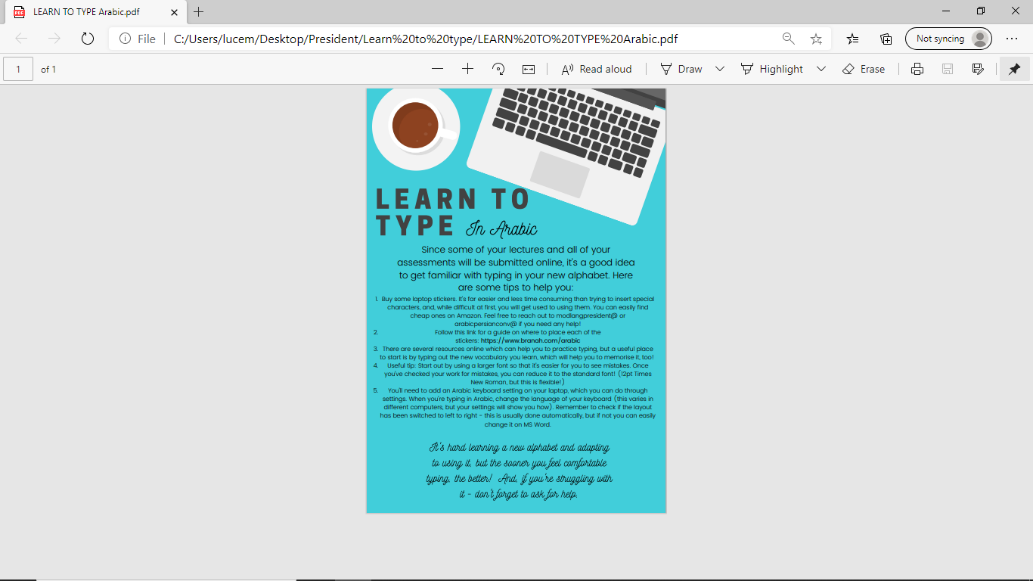
This year, we managed to fill all the class rep roles throughout the school. They work very closely with the convenors and have been doing a great job. I decided, with the Director of Postgraduate Studies (DoPG), to change the number of PG roles available to one PGT student and one PGR student, which has been successful thus far.

I also decided to change the way expansion packs were allocated in Modern Languages. Due to the unique nature of our school, I decided to have an online rep, a social rep, and a minutes rep per department, as well as two careers reps, two disabilities reps and a library rep for the whole School. I created a SoML specific information pack for all the reps to help them to understand our unique structure.

Similarly, there was a sustainability rep elected specifically for Modern Languages. She has been working on several different projects such as a Modern Languages specific beach clean.

2. FRESHERS

**Videos & resources for Freshers**

Over the summer I was thinking that it is a very strange and difficult time to come to university at the moment. So, in order to hopefully settle some of our new students’ anxieties, I made two videos. One was to introduce myself and let them know that they could reach out at any time, and the second was to talk about my experiences with online teaching and tell them a little more about how it will work in languages. I also created a ‘learn to type in …’ resource for students studying Arabic, Persian or Russian (see example). In normal times, we would handwrite in these languages for at least the first year whilst we got to grips with the new alphabet. However, since paper uploads are no longer possible, I thought it would be beneficial for freshers to have a resource with tips and tricks on how to become more confident in typing in their new language.

**Welcome event**

On the Friday of Freshers Week, I hosted two welcome events for new students. The first involved members of staff and the student convenor from each of the languages departments introducing themselves and responding to questions both from myself and new students via the chat on MS Teams. The second followed the same format but was specifically for Comparative Literature students.

They both went extremely well with no technological issues or awkward silences, which is always a concern with online events! They were also very well attended with around 200 students attending in total across the two events. I hope they were useful for new students!

3. EMPLOYABILITY EVENTS

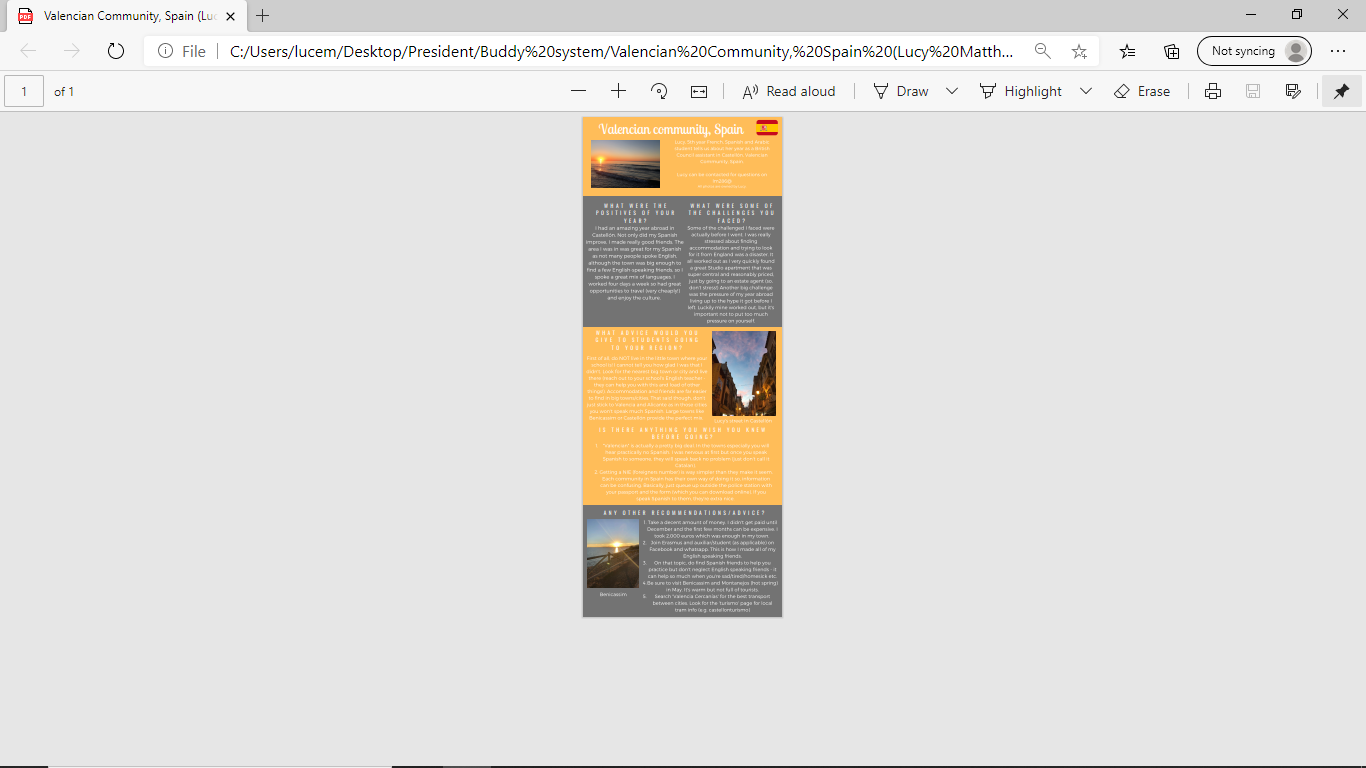
Year abroad work opportunities

Most students when they go abroad to work (rather than study) do a British Council assistantship. However, since Brexit the future of the British Council has been in peril. So, I hosted an event for students of French, Spanish, Italian, and German hoping to go abroad and work in a non-British Council job. Several students who did a private placement joined me to talk about how they secured their job whilst they were in St Andrews in their second year and what their experience was like. Arabic, Persian, and Russian students do not have the option to do a private placement on their year abroad, which is why the event was aimed at European Languages students.

Foreign Office Translation & Interpretation

One of the highlights of the semester for me was inviting Richard Littlewood, Head of translating and Interpreting at the FCDO to talk about his career. He gave invaluable advice to languages students looking to get into the field, and the event was very well attended.

4. YEAR ABROAD BUDDY SCHEME

One of my most important manifesto points was to provide a pre-year abroad support system. We receive lots of general information but nothing specific to the region where we are placed before going. This meant that in my case, I was very unsure about how to find accommodation or carry out essential administrative procedures, meaning that my first few weeks and months in Spain were incredibly stressful. As a way to prevent this in future, I have created a buddy scheme which matches students who have already been abroad with those who are going to the same or a similar region.

This involved a lot of work on my part, but I have managed to get the buddy system going. The first step was recruiting people who had already been abroad to be buddies and to answer questions about their year/semester. I then collated all of this information and made infographics (see example) for each of the locations to be made available on the Year Abroad MS Team next semester.

After completing this process, I opened the scheme for second-year sign ups and began matching them with their buddies. They have the option to message/email their buddy and, COVID restrictions permitting, to meet up with them pre-departure in semester two to ask more specific questions. I’m very excited to see it up and running!

5. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, I have only been able to attend one EDI committee due to having class at the same time. However, something I have been talking to the EDI lead and the DoT about is pronouns in languages. Since most, if not all, of the languages we teach are gendered (meaning that a person’s gender affects their use of adjectives/verbs etc.), it is very difficult for non-binary, transitioning or gender-fluid people, amongst others, to participate in language classes. So, I have pushed for resources to be made available for both staff on students on how to be gender neutral in certain languages, as well as classes on the new pronouns that are being used in each language. There is a teaching away day dedicated to EDI issues coming up in which all staff in the School will discuss this.

6. COVID-19

**Dual delivery and synchronous teaching**

Obviously, synchronous teaching has posed huge problems in the SoML, particularly in language and oral classes. As previously mentioned, I joined a Working Group with the DoT and other members of staff in the department specifically to come up with ideas to combat these concerns. I regularly have discussions with the HoS and the DoT about student concerns around this.

**Challenges**

The pandemic wasn’t expected for anybody but definitely wasn’t something I planned when running for election. It unfortunately has meant that many of my manifesto points will be left unfulfilled both due to some of it being impossible due to restrictions and because I have spent the majority of my time representing student concerns surrounding COVID. It’s been a challenge and initially it was difficult as I struggled with imposter syndrome. However, the more I have attended meetings the more I feel secure in my role and feel able to accurately represent student views.

7. SEMESTER TWO PLANS

During semester two, I hope to achieve:

1. An Honours Fair – I want to have students and staff who study/teach the Honours content modules to talk to people wanting to do them going forward.

2. Employability Series – I’m planning a series of events centred on employability for languages students, namely interviewing/writing CVs in a foreign language, correctly advertising your language skills on LinkedIn etc.

3. Post-year abroad support – One of my manifesto points, I want to establish a system of post-year abroad support for those returning from abroad. I would have liked to have done this earlier in the semester for those returning from abroad next semester but unfortunately it wasn’t possible.

8. MANIFESTO UPDATE

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| **Manifesto point** | **Tracker** | **Comment** |
| Outgoing year abroad buddy system  *Students due to go on their year abroad will be matched with someone who has recently returned from the same region to help them with specific advice.* |  | Up and running! |
| Summer, career, and internship opportunities  *Speakers from various language specific and non-language specific companies will come to talk to our students about possible careers and internship opportunities. Similarly, speakers from various immersive summer language schools will talk to us.* |  | This is in the process. I have put on two careers events with more planned for next semester. However, I am yet to put on an internship or summer opportunity event. I hope to do so next semester. |
| Relaxed interaction with your department  *Events whereby students can talk to their teachers in a relaxed and less intimidating environment in order to improve both confidence and conversational skills.* |  | Unfortunately, due to the COVID pandemic this has not been possible so far and is unlikely to happen. |
| Post year-abroad support  *Whether finding it tough to get back into education, struggling with the weather or feeling that another language was neglected during time abroad, students will receive both educational and pastoral support on their return to St Andrews.* |  | This has not been possible so far due to everything being online (I don’t think it would work quite as well online!), |

I’m looking forward to next semester!

Lucy