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SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY: PRESIDENT’S REPORT

SEMESTER ONE, 2020/21

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# ***§0: Introduction***

The following report aims to summarise the key activities that I - with a lot of help from your class representatives - have been up to in my first semester as Philosophy School President. I am proud of all the work that has been done so far this year, especially considering the trying circumstances we find ourselves in. However, there is still certainly a lot more that could be achieved. The experience I have gained from this first semester in the role should allow me to make even more progress in this coming second semester.

Thanks to anyone who is taking the time to read through this report. If you have any questions about anything at all that I mention in the following sections, please do get in contact!

Have a great second semester,

*Rachel Neighbour,* *philosophypresident@st-andrews.ac.uk*

# ***§1: Class Representatives***

One of the first duties I had this semester was running this year’s class representative elections. There were two separate elections – the first was for UG and PGT reps, and a few weeks later PGR reps were elected. In both cases, I advertised the opportunity to become a class representative via email. Students who were interested then nominated themselves using the online elections portal. Almost all positions were contested, with several students running in each category.

Once nominations closed, voting was completed, and ballots were counted, the newly-elected UG and PGT reps attended a training event on Microsoft Teams. Here, I got to meet and get to know the representatives, and find out their own priorities and ambitions for the School. This was also where, for those who were interested, reps could take on extra ‘expansion pack’ roles.

The core role of a class rep is collecting feedback for the SSCC (more on the SSCC in §2). However, many reps chose to go beyond this - especially those in expansion pack roles. For example, the Disabilities Rep distributed a survey asking philosophy students with disabilities about their experience in the school, and the results of this survey can now be used by the school to help inform policy. Another example is one of the Social Reps helping out with the promotion of the St Andrews Philosophy Students Facebook group - this resulted in the group gaining upwards of 150 new members. These are just two examples among many of the great work that class reps did this semester.

# ***§2: Student-Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC)***

The Student Staff Consultative Committee is held once per semester, and is an opportunity for class reps and lecturers to discuss and act on module feedback. As school president, I am responsible for organising and chairing the SSCC.

This semester we had to hold the SSCC virtually, on Microsoft Teams, for the first time. It was also the first time that all module feedback was collected via an online survey instead of in person. Unfortunately, despite advertising the module feedback forms in lectures, seminars, and by email, the response rate was much lower than it would usually be when collected in person. Working on ways to improve this response rate is a priority for the coming semester.

In the SSCC itself, class reps took it in turns to present feedback on the modules they represent, and then discuss that feedback with the lecturer(s) of that module. I was worried that having to have the meeting take place on Teams might somehow impede good discussion, but I was pleased that, largely by making good use of the hand-raising function, it all went smoothly.

A great deal of the feedback discussed at the SSCC was to do with online teaching. It was noted that across all modules, students really wanted online teaching to be as engaging as possible. Students liked the use of breakout rooms, and lectures and seminars that were live and interactive. This sort of online teaching has now become the norm in the School.

# ***§3: Joint School Internship Panel***

At the very beginning of the semester, I ran a survey to gauge which kind of careers events appealed to students the most. The idea of a student internship panel came out as a very popular result, and so this was the event I decided to run.

The event itself was run jointly by me and three other school presidents – of Divinity, Film Studies, and Social Anthropology – on Microsoft Teams in late October. We had a few student panellists from each school talk about their personal internship experience, followed by a Q&A, and then a presentation from the Careers Centre. Around 30 students attended, and I received a lot of positive feedback from those attendees. A particular highlight was the huge variation in the types of internships that the panellists had completed. They all had interesting and different experiences to share.

This coming semester, I will be working with other school presidents to run another careers event. One of my aims with this event will be to improve turnout. It has been a general trend that online events have much lower attendance than in-person events, and I am very keen to work on improving this.

# ***§4: Education Committee and the School Presidents Forum***

Every week I attended Education Committee (EduCom). This is a weekly meeting of all the School Presidents, the Modern Languages Convenors, the Faculty President, and the Director of Education. We discuss any and all issues currently affecting students. Twice in the semester, there is also the School Presidents Forum. Here, we have a chance to put these issues to the Proctor and the Deans.

Minutes for all these meetings can be found on the union website: <https://www.yourunion.net/representation/academic/education-committee/>

# ***§5: Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Committee (TLA)***

This committee meets a few times during the semester. I am the primary student representative on this committee – the rest of the committee is comprised of department staff, and the PhD Tutors Rep. Some notable outcomes of the committee last semester include - improving the department extension policy; the introduction of essay templates, which will make marking easier for tutors (in particular, for tutors who may have a learning disability like dyslexia); and the standardisation of the format of module outlines. The latter was brought about partially due to the feedback gathered by the class rep for students with disabilities.

# ***§6: Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee (EDI)***

Another committee I regularly attend is the EDI committee. This committee is joint with the Schools of Philosophy, Film Studies, and Social Anthropology. I sit on this committee along with the school presidents of the other two schools. This committee discusses many issues, and has a wide range of goals and commitments. I would recommend visiting the EDI committee’s webpage to find out in detail what the committee has already achieved, and the projects that are ongoing: <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/philosophy/about/equality-diversity/>. For the School of Philosophy specifically, there is also Minorities and Philosophy (MAP), who do a great deal of excellent work making our school a more equal, diverse, and inclusive place. They too have a website: <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/sasp/introduction/minorities-and-philosophy/>.

# ***§7: Weekly DoT Catch-Up***

Every week, I had a one-on-one catch up with the Philosophy Director of Teaching. I would share any feedback I had received during the week, and we then worked together to resolve any issues. Due to the frequency of these meetings, all kinds of student concerns could be fixed very quickly – these ranged from problems affecting the whole school, to module-specific issues, to the concerns of individual students. We will be continuing these weekly meetings for the rest of the academic year.

# ***§8: COVID-19***

It would not be right of me not to acknowledge the effect that the pandemic has had on student experience this past semester. I have split this portion of the report into two sections:

*§8.1: Learning*

Last semester began with online-only teaching, and slowly phased into the ‘dual delivery’ mode of teaching. The continual feedback from students that I received through the many feedback channels (email, the anonymous feedback form, Facebook, surveys, class reps, etc.) was certainly the most valuable resource I had when working with the school to ensure that this new style of teaching was working well for everybody.

Naturally, there were a lot of teething issues early on – especially with the transition into dual delivery. In particular, students on the online-end of dual delivery teaching often felt that they were less able to fully engage in seminars and tutorials than the students who were attending the class in-person. By the end of the semester, a few strategies were in place that helped everyone in the tutorial to be more included, and initial technology issues had been mostly resolved. Unfortunately, it is looking as though learning will be online-only again for at least a large chunk of the coming semester. However, the lessons learned from dual delivery last semester will certainly stand the School in good stead for a return to the format when it is safe to do so.

*§8.2: Wellbeing*

By far the biggest challenge of the semester was simply living with and studying through the restrictions and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic. The challenge that these times have posed to students and staff alike was reflected strongly in formal feedback, as well as casual conversation. For first time students of St Andrews, it was particularly difficult. Adjusting to being a student at the university, whilst being unable to go to class or make friends in the usual way was a hard and isolating experience for many.

A few online social events were run to help students meet each other, and the roll out of the university-wide study buddy scheme in the revision weeks was certainly a big help too. However, I acknowledge that there is still a great deal of work to do in building a strong online sense of community in the School of Philosophy, and this is where I intend to focus a lot of my efforts in the coming semester.

# ***§9: Looking Ahead to Semester Two***

I would like to finish this report by giving a quick overview of some of my aims for the coming semester:

* Improve the sense of online community in Philosophy – run more online socials, and be more active on social media.
* Work to improve student response rate to online feedback forms and student turn-out to online events.
* Run another Joint Schools Careers Event.
* Continue to work with the expertise of EDI, MAP, and the Disabilities Rep, to make the School more inclusive and more accessible.

If you’ve made it to the end of this – thanks for reading! Best of luck in Semester Two.

**Rachel Neighbour**

President of the School of Philosophy (2020-21)