# School Presidents Forum

St Andrews Students' Association

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**Meeting date: 15/04/2021 (6pm) via MS Teams**

**Apologies**: Dr Leyla Hussein (University Rector), Ryan Gibb, Rachel Neighbour, Belinda Hawes, Sanjana Ramaswamy

**Absent**: Stella Ezeh (Rector's Assessor), Abi Whitefield, Kushal Tansania, Orrin McAleer

**Present**: Amy Gallacher (chairing), Joseph Horsnell (Arts and Divinity FP), Chloe Fielding (Science FP), Claire Peddie (Proctor), Frank Muller (AVP Learning & Teaching), Caroline McWilliams (incoming PG Convenor)

Callum Irvine, Sarah Johnston, George Watts, Teo Yarkova, Imaan Kotadia, Geraint Morgan, Brynne Stewart, Lindsay Nielsen, Camiel Leake, Erik Crnkovich, Jeanne Adam, Elinor Layne, Ursula Goldsmith, Hannah Koegler, Lowell So, Murray Whyte

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# AGENDA

1. Introduction & Welcome **(5 mins, Amy Gallacher)**

AG welcomed participants to the last SPF of the semester and read the apologies.

2. Accessible Readings **(10 mins, Elinor Layne)**

**EL**: The issue of reading accessibility for students with intellectual disabilities came up in the Social Anthropology SSCC. Many of these students use software which read text though and allow highlighting, playback etc and this is the only way for a lot of these students to access the text. A problem that's happening in Social Anthropology (and probably other Schools) is

that core texts are often scanned pages which are not compatible with this software. This puts impetus on disabled students to spend a lot of time trying to find the resources or convert files to make the software work. The alternative format suite used to do this sort of thing but not this year. This was brought up to the staff at the SSCC, saying that this is a reasonable adjustment that musty be made in order to help around 1/5th of students learn and engage with the material. There was some pushback from staff due to the efforts the library would have to go to do this (thought they acknowledged that it is really important and has to be done). There needs to be a University-wide initiative to tackle this issue. EL has been trying to work on it all year and not made much headway so is wondering what the plans are for the alternative learning suite going forward. It is surprising there is not a clear solution for this already.

- **CP:** This has only recently been raised so don't have an immediate response but will certainly look into it. Will find out the problem. When texts are scanned, the software that allows it to be read out isn't there. This is interesting as they have done a lot of work on this area, understanding these problems etc., which has resulted in the narrowing of the disability attainment gap. Many students with learning difficulties have said that online study has made learning more easy. The specific issue must be followed up on to see what can be done.
- **FM:** Is the specific problem the pdf format of the scanned of images? This issue has been brought to him before as when resources are as web text, the assistive software work really well, but pdfs seem to be problematic for this. This presented in the case of e-books as they are typically delivered as pdfs. Fiona Whelan and the Library have been aware of this for a while and are working on it.  A problem there is that some commercially provided e-resource packages come in a specific format which is hard to change. EL is referring to in-house scanned hard copies of books etc. What is the specific software issue? Would they work as jpegs rather than pdfs? Is it a resolution issue?
- **EL:** As understood, the issue is that the file given is essentially a picture of the page and this can't be run through the software. Alternative format suite directed towards a resource called Census Access but when this was circulated, the feedback was that a lot of disabled students found it difficult to run and it would take hours to run their texts through.
- **SJ:** Regarding file formats, screen reader is a bad name for what it does as it doesn't read text. If it is a picture or scan, there is no information in the scan as to what the text says. The website EL is referring to uses tools such as machine learning to recognise the shape of letters and words, in order to spell out the words by visual interpretation of black pixels. This takes a long time over the course of the whole document. What FM is referring to is that there are two kinds of pdfs. One is like a raw text pdf which you create from a word document. The other (a pdf print) is used to make a picture. You can do text to speech on a pdf that has come from a word document but not one that was originally formatted as a photo. For the most part, if a staff member created a pdf of notes deriving from word, screen reading is fine, but if it was created via Adobe Illustrator etc., it would not be possible to screen read as there is no data as to what the text says. That is when you need to put it through the software EL is talking about. Part of the issue of this is that staff don't know how to check which one is being used as they don't know this exists. The basic guide is that

if you can highlight and copy/paste text in a document, it can be screen-read. If not, it can't.

- **FM:** So it looks like one step would be to ensure that in-house scanning would be done in the superior format? That would be fairly straightforward.
- **SJ**: Scanning a page out of a book will never work for a screen-reader that just converts text to speech as there is no text data in the document. The computer only reads an image. Any scan of material, unless you have good software that interprets it as it is scanned, will need to go through extra software in order to read the text data into the document. It has to be considered that giving students access to software that interprets the text just puts the workload on the student (though the alternative of asking the Library to do it just puts it on the Library which is already busy).
- **AG**: So this is one to explore with the Library. SJ, EL are you happy to be involved in these discussions? *(Agreement)*
- **CP:** Fiona Whelan in Student Services could also be one to talk to as she is very active about making sure students with disabilities have access to resources. There might also be something we can do about training academic staff to understand the formats they are using.

*Actions: FM, CP, AG to reach out to Fiona Whelan, link up with the library, speak to Margaret Adamson to make sure staff know about the formats*


3. Academic Year 2021/22 **(30 mins, Clare Peddie)**

**AG**: All of the emails that I received regarding agenda points were regarding the next academic year and considering this is our last official SPF I thought we could use this time to chat next year and reflect upon what has gone well and what we can learn for next year. Clare is going to give a little update on the current shape of the plans and would welcome questions and your feedback on aspects as they form.

**CP:** Every decision made around delivery of teaching balances the provision of certainty to staff/students with optimism for opening up/serial disappointment when guidelines prohibit the changes which were planned (this was seen this semester when the decision was made to make the rest of the academic year online). Students in England have fallen victim to serial disappointment as they were repeatedly told they would be back after Easter and they are not. Planning for next academic year, we are trying to maximise the amount of in-person teaching able to be delivered while minimising the changes that you might have to experience and also create some certainties as to how things will be. The University believes that in next semester 1, there will be some students who are unable to come to St Andrews, e.g. because of the country they live in (with reference to the COVID situation there, availability of flights etc) and they will have to be able to study online. Social distancing will also likely still be in place, probably still at 2m. Putting pressure on the Scottish Government to reduce this to 1m but this is very unlikely to go through (except maybe in labs or special cases). So it will be unlikely that lectures of hundreds of people will be possible.

They have to start planning, looking at room availability, the number of people that can be in each room given social distancing, timetabling etc given these parameters. The DOTs have also been told about these parameters and that for every module, every student in St Andrews

should get at least fortnightly in person teaching. This could be as tutorials, seminars, small group teaching, labs etc. Semester 2 planning will begin in October / mid semester 1 to see if it can be more open.

They wanted your initial reactions to this. Also, as soon as these plans are public, it will end up in the papers, saying that it will be all online next year here. Even if big lectures have to be online, they are trying to have as much in person teaching as possible. In semester 1, St Andrews students got a significant amount of in person teaching compared to students at other institutions because so much teaching here is in small groups anyway (tutorials, labs etc). They very much want to keep it this way (as long as the guidelines allow). It will hopefully be better in semester 1 next year than semester 1 this year.

**FM:** That was mostly it. The key take-aways are 1) We will try and maximise in person teaching (if everything goes well, with no further breakouts or variants, 70-80% of teaching should be in person compared to normal times), 2) Large in person classes won't happen, 3) A small percentage of students won't be able to join us and we must cater for that, 4) We will offer students the option to work remotely but students will very much be invited back, 5) Along with teaching, we will try to make other aspects of the St Andrews experience (co-curricular activities etc) in person too.

Also, if students are locked down, ill, can't afford it, can't get flights, or just anxious about the situation, they can opt for online teaching and will be provided for. Anyone who can come should come at the normal time for Fresher's Week, advising, pre-session etc but if they can't there will be two further entry points in weeks 4 and 7 of semester 1. The process for opting for online delivery will just be to let the University know. There won't be a need to submit evidence or medical letters, just notify the University and tell them when you would want to come. Looking further forward, the picture is less clear but hopefully semester 2 will feel relatively normal again with less social distancing, easier timetabling and bigger classes. Can only do that if by mid semester 1, all guidelines and behaviour of students indicates this would be safe. Very committed to student experience/quality but it is not worth people being hospitalised/dying for. Safety id the most important thing, beyond that will do the best we can.

- **CI:** Thank you for the reassurance that plans are being put in place. You mentioned you wanted semester 1 next year to be better than semester 1 this year, particularly with reference to the option to study online. This is very welcome. What lessons have been learnt from semester 1 specifically, with reference to accessibility, staff workload and student engagement? How will this be improved upon?
- **CP:** One reason we want to create entry points is because we want to minimise the number of instances in which students are engaging online and in person in the same room. Want to try to create online tutorial groups and in person groups and avoid the hybrid experience. Where hybrid is mandatory, will try and put those classes in the rooms where hybrid learning has worked well. Additionally, will create 'hybrid saints' (PGR students trained to run around the campus and support academics in setting up the equipment, cameras and mics to ensure everything works well when hybrid learning is required). The academics themselves often have trouble with the technology so this should help with the issues stemming from IT services trying to stretch out all over campus, fixing hybrid learning problems.

- **CI:** Having more support for academics would help significantly as well as removing hybrid learning from most situations.
- **FM:** Other lessons learned: didn't turn anyone down who asked for remote learning but started with a process that asked for evidence and this caused student worry about being rejected. That is why you no longer need evidence. Another lesson is that there were some modules where there was no in person teaching due to the design of modules and bottlenecks in rooms/staff resourcing. Trying to avoid this in the future so that all modules get at least fortnightly in person teaching (for those that want it). Thirdly, minimising hybrid teaching. Where it is unavoidable, money is being invested in kit and academics are being trained and better supported to improve the quality of hybrid learning.
- **GM:** What will this fortnightly encounter look like. It makes sense for classes that need labs to do this as a lab format but for some arts modules that only meet once a week, it could be pretty disruptive to jump each week from online to hybrid. How prescriptive are the guidelines in terms of mandating the fortnightly meeting be a tutorial vs an office hour instead?
- **FM:** This concerns models with large memberships of more than 35 / 80 where they would be particularly impacted by the restrictions to large teaching groups. The idea is that if you have some classes in geography and some in psychology for example, all of the classes are above the cut-off for normal in person teaching, so each fortnight they should have a scheduled lab or tutorial where they can see members of staff and students in the same room as them. In most arts honours classes, the membership is either so small that they would be able to have normal weekly classes in person or, as in philosophy or IR for example, membership is above 35 and time is divided roughly evenly between lectures and tutorial groups which are below the 35. The tutorial groups, therefore, would be able to run in person. So this one week on, one week off model is unlikely to occur in honours arts classes. This rule has been introduced for the larger modules which otherwise would be unable to have in person classes.
- **GM:** I was more referring to modules where modules where most people are in St Andrews but there is a minority who can't come to St Andrews. The flicking to hybrid could be more disruptive than just staying as hybrid for the whole semester.
- **FM:** St Andrews is not set up in such a way that the Deans/Proctor dictates each module. As an example, a large management class of 40-50 students where 38 are in person and 12 are remote, we would hope the module is set up that the 12 are constantly online with a time selected that teaching is at sensible hours, and the 38 are taught in person every week. There may be difficult example. E.g. in a History senior honours class, there may be 6 students in St Andrews with 2 online. The question would be how to best teach that group. The tutor may say the 6 will be taught in person and the 2 will be taught separately in online classes. That may be intense and the 2 might think that this doesn't work as there are not enough people to have good discussions etc. At this point, hybrid teaching would be considered. In this case, a good class and a good setting would help the class run more normally. Would not personally recommend a switch to online for the whole semester unless the 6 wanted this. Cases like this have to be designed for the benefit of the students involved. It has to be for the good of the many, rather than the few. However, the University will do their best to support students.

- **GW:** If people have the opportunity to do everything online, they would also have the opportunity to do their exams online. For people in St Andrews, will they also be allowed to do exams online? Online v in person exams are very different and it would seem unfair if some people had to do one rather than the other and didn't have the choice. Been asked by many.
- **CP:** All exams will be online next year. Just purchased a proper digital assessment tool which will help students do exams online. This will be running for the start of next semester. (Medical practical sessions are excluded from this of course).
- **GW:** Thank you. To clarify, does this include online proctoring?
- **CP:** Proctoring will be discussed imminently. There is a paper coming to LTC which AG will see and share with the SPs. There is an ability to do this with this software but will have the discussion about this at LTC. Personally, it seems very unlikely to happen. Would rather design the exams to make them harder to cheat on. Sometimes, external accreditation bodies insist on some form on proctoring (in various degrees) and these have to be met. Physics, chemistry and medicine are the subjects that may need this. It seems unlikely proctoring will be done unless it is required.
- **AG:** To clarify, the paper coming to LTC is the one that SPs provided feedback to Kevin on a few weeks ago.

*Action: AG to share this with SPs*

- **IK:** Given this requirement for fortnightly in person sessions and the large class numbers of Geography honours modules, staff are worried about having to deliver on this, with reference to the work increase and the spaces needed for the small class. To split the huge class up, the staff member might have to deliver 4 or 5 tutorials. What would be in place to prevent staff having to put in lots of extra hours? How prescriptive is this?
- **FM:** This is a big problem in Geography and SD where some classes run at 8 and others 80. Don't think seminar teaching to a group of 80 is ideal and this is something which should prompt the school to think about the structure of their modules. Sharon is being very imaginative about how to tackle this. Maybe the lecture is pre-recorded and the classes are split into more manageable sizes. We can't ask for the impossible, but it wouldn't be fair for students on these modules to uniquely not get in person class when the come to St Andrews. The School is under pressure to come up with something, but they have been given half a year's notice, and in person teaching only has to be occasional. Will support them and won't make them increase workload to breaking point. The divide between the small classes of physical geography and the very large classes political geography should be addressed creatively.
- **AG:** So the School will have flexibility and the Deans will support them?
- **FM:** Yes.
- **IK:** Were bouncing ideas on what can be one for students and it seems difficult to solve without adding caps to module numbers (which no-one wants). This is helpful though, thank you.
- **SJ:** Was talking to staff and students from several schools about the funds for buying technical equipment. For many, laptops are dying after a year of constant use. Will these funds still exist next year?

- **CP:** Absolutely. Student Services have support available for those who can't afford technical equipment and the funds for this will still be there next year. All staff are provided with the technical equipment they need to be able to work. They are not asked to buy their own laptops. If they need headphones, webcams etc, they can order them from IT Services. Hopefully, the effects of the pandemic are decreasing but there are funds set aside (including some donations) which will always be able to support students.
- **SJ:** As SPs, we have all realised that these funds are not well publicised, and a lot of staff and students don't know of their existence. Could this be looked at? Could they be better publicised and the staff and students be given clearer information on how to access them?
- **CP:** Thank you, that is helpful.
- **SJ:** Another communication issue (coming out of the Court focus groups) is that a lot of students are reporting feeling like they don't get the best communication. Plans haven't been released for next semester yet and we've talked about this here, but going forward, could we look at how clearly communications are relayed to students. Emails can say 'you'll hear in a week' or 'here is a website to look at' and clear messages are lost. The move towards more in person teaching in semester 1 (plus online lectures) must be communicated very clearly. This would take the burden off next year's SPs/FPs next year, as currently, they are responsible for a lot of clarification of these communications. A lot of the time, the FPs send things to SPs to give feedback on the wording/clarity. Could this be done for the University emails, to improve the clarity and messaging of emails? Student confusion just puts more workload on everyone.
- **CP:** Perhaps, Dan should utilise the SPs to test communications?
- **AG:** Yeah, maybe. But also, staff need to have the information to hand as sometimes it feels like we have the information before a lot of staff do. It puts Reps in the odd position of explaining what's going on despite not being responsible for making those decisions or knowing the nuances of what's going on. Sometimes information reaches the DOED but not the teaching staff.

*Action: AG to formalise the relationship between the new SPs and the new President in order to improve communication*

- **CP:** Often, it seems like the SPs are better communicators than the DOTs. Largely this is because the DOTs are overwhelmed by the volume of information directed to them.
- **FM:** A lot of this has to do with people wanting to be informed as well. This is a recurring issue, where people sometimes demand (often angrily) information from the University, even if the information has been out for years and they just haven't found/sought it. Clarity and effectiveness of information sharing is important. We all have to get through Teams, emails and social media for information, and so much is out there that we can become deaf to the main points. Anything that helps, though, will be readily looked at.

*Action: FM and CP to look at the University communication channels*

- **AG:** One other thing is that something is coming out of the communication group to make an online hub of all emails sent out. This would let staff and students find information without sifting through the emails to find information.
- **CP:** This already exists for staff. The education hub is there, although it is a difficult one. Communication is the hardest thing.
- **AG:** If we nail this down, it will make everyone's life easier.

4. AOCB

**CI:** In terms of study spaces, received a lot of complaints about how inefficient it is to have the bookings open at midnight. The slots fill within 5 minutes and then people don't cancel their slots which makes it even more difficult for people. Is there a way to adjust/improve this to make it more usable/efficient.

- **FM**: The midnight point has been mentioned before and this has been put to Katy Stevens at the Library. She found this reasonable. It will hopefully be moved to a different time and has been left with her. As for the no-shows who don't cancel their bookings, there is only so much they can do. Multiple bookings, hogging the times to decide later etc is very difficult to tackle unless you want to keep registers and list the no-shows for penalising, but this is unfriendly. Informal telling's off seem to be the only way to tackle this. It is difficult.
- **CP**: Hopefully the Scottish Government guidance which mandates spaces be bookable will be released and then this problem will go away. We would rather not do the space bookings but at the moment, it is required by law. AT the Can-Do meeting today, it was discussed that a lot of the marquee could be made into study spaces in exam leave. Very conscious that there is not enough study space at the University. However, the University never encouraged the 4500 students to come back without spaces so it has been difficult to provide foe everyone here without breaking the rules. Will do the best we can but the best hope is that the bookable space rule is released.
- **CI:** Do you know when the booking time will change? Can this be chased up?

*Action: AG to follow up on this.*

*Action: Anyone who wants to join these conversations to email AG to join meeting tomorrow.*

**SJ:** This might need to go to the Provost but is worth discussing. Some PhD students have come forward to talk about their extensions. Many were given extensions due to COVID but there is now a gap between when they finish their PhD and when they graduate. For example, some were planning on finishing in November to graduate in December but now they are finishing in February and not graduating until June. So was wondering if anything is being looked at so that they can get their PhD certificate in order to apply for jobs/positions before they officially graduate?

- **CP:** Not able to issue a certificate until the ceremony has happened.
- **FM:** Yes. They can be given letters saying that everything has been done and approval has been given, but the certificate can't be given until the official ceremony occurs. You also never know exactly when a PhD is going to be done. You don't know if you will pass when you prepare for a viva, or how long after that it will take.

Sometimes there is a long gap. Undergraduates who may finish out of the normal rhythm also can't be graduated out of the normal graduation times as they happen at fixed dates. The registrar gives these very formal, stamped, signed, sealed letters saying that a student has done *everything* except the ceremony and normally this will do the trick. The exception is that some funders/visa requirements do not accept this but in these cases, the University tries to help. It is a difficult one though.

**AG:** Congratulations to SPs and staff for the work that has been achieved this year and for making it in this difficult year. Thank you CP and FM for looking out for students and following everything up. We are all grateful and appreciative.

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*Meeting adjourned 7pm*