Semester 1 Report 2020

School President of Social Anthropology

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Contents

* Introduction (1)
* Handover Training and Summer 2020 (1)
* Events (2)
* Weekly Emails (2)
* Meetings and Committees (3)
* Class Representatives (3)
* Effects of COVID-19 (4)
* Semester 2 Plans (4)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to outline all that I have accomplished (or aimed to accomplish) in the Autumn Semester of the 2020-21 Academic Year. It has certainly been a time of unexpected change and challenges, but I have been very fortunate to have a great deal of support from those I work with as we move anxiously through this mid-pandemic world. I preface this report with a statement of the personal challenges, and ultimately, growth that I have experienced over my first Semester as School President of the Department of Social Anthropology: this has been an entirely new role for me, and despite the difficulties of this transition, I feel that I have learned a lot. In addition to a summary of what I have been up to over the last several months in this role, I will conclude this report with my plans for the coming Semester, in the hopes that this will provide greater transparency for my role and ultimately assist my eventual successor.

HAND-OVER TRAINING and SUMMER 2020

Prior to my official transition into this role, I underwent training by the former Director of Education alongside my fellow soon-to-be School Presidents. This training addressed the main duties associated with the School President role, as well as the main worries and difficulties encountered by many School Presidents in their transition periods. This training was very helpful not only for the aforementioned reasons, but also allowed all incoming School Presidents to meet one another prior to the start of the Semester.

In addition to this formal training, I met with my predecessor, Katie Walker, to discuss the role in more detail, particularly as it pertains to the Department of Social Anthropology. Katie sent me a thorough handover document which included information on running events, department budgets, key contacts in the department, and helpful suggestions for managing the Class Rep team. Additionally, I met with Katie over Teams to ask her additional questions about this information. This was absolutely crucial for me moving forward, as Katie elucidated a lot of key information that helped me as I moved forward into the role.

I fully took over as Social Anthropology School President on 1st July 2020. In these early days of my presidency, I put together ‘Welcome Packs’ for incoming students (including helpful maps, staff information, and a letter from myself), and coordinated with the Head of Department and Director of Teaching on the information that should be communicated through these documents. I also had a few meetings with the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee for my school over the summer (these are detailed more fully in the section titled ‘Meetings and Committees’).

During the Summer, I also set about delivering on one of my main campaign promises: better attention to students with learning disabilities. The crux of this goal was to make more readings compatible with softwares such as ‘Read and Write’. I got in touch with the Alternative Format Suite in August to see whether they might be able to do mass conversions of reading lists, and learned that the AFS would not be operating in the typical capacity this year, owing to COVID. Though this was of course disappointing, the AFS did point me toward an online resource called SensusAccess, which the University recently purchases access to and which can convert the majority of photocopied readings into a more disability-friendly format. I shared this with all Social Anthropology students early in the semester.

EVENTS

One of my primary focuses this past semester has been the coordination of various events within my department. I would say that one of my shortcomings thus far has been the lack of social events planned, and I hope to change this in the coming semester (see Semester 2 plans for more information). However, I did plan and execute a number of careers and department-specific events.

At the start of the semester, I assisted staff with ‘Welcome’ talks for each incoming year group. These were generally well attended and students were given the opportunity to ask any burning questions about Social Anthropology and the format of what promised to be a very strange year. A few weeks later, however, I noticed that I was still getting quite a lot of questions from students about basic aspects of the department, so I ran a Teams Live event called, ‘Ask a Fourth Year’. Students from first-, second-, and third-year Social Anthropology were able to ask questions to a panel of fourth-years in an hour-long session. This event was very well attended and I hope it served to alleviate the stress of some students.

In October, I planned an internship panel alongside the School Presidents of Philosophy (Rachel Neighbour), Film Studies (Teo Yarkova), and Divinity (Lowell So). We were able to recruit 2-4 honours students from each of our departments to sit on an ‘internship panel’ and talk about their experiences and advice in finding internships that related to their chosen discipline. After students had asked questions to panelists, Careers Centre rep Craig Phillips did a short presentation for attendees. This event was well attended and well received, and the recording was also shared with many students after the fact.

WEEKLY EMAILS

My main mode of contact with Social Anthropology students has been through my weekly mass emails. In these emails, I pass along any new department information, as well as any advertisements from societies or University bodies. I typically send these emails only to Undergraduate and Postgraduate-Taught students, as little of the information shared typically applies to Postgraduate Researchers. When information is particularly pertinent to this group, I prefer to email them separately. This has been an effective mode of communication with students and I plan to continue this into Semester 2.

MEETINGS AND COMMITTEES

Another key area of my duties as School President has been to attend meetings and sit on committees as an Academic Representative. Perhaps the most crucial of these has been the Education Committee (EduCom), composed of all School Presidents, Arts & Divinity and Science & Medicine Faculty Presidents, the Postgraduate Convenor, and the Director of Education. EduCom meets weekly to discuss new developments from the University and flag issues within our departments.. This committee has been absolutely invaluable during my time as School President.

Aside from EduCom, I also sit on the PAFS EDI committee (Philosophy, Anthropology, and Film Studies/ Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion). The EDI committee meets a few times per Semester to raise issues that may impact the equality, diversity, and inclusivity of our school and its modules.

I also met with the Social Anthropology Department’s TLA (Teaching, Learning, and Assessment) committee. This group meets several times per Semester to discuss academic (and subsequent wellbeing) issues in the Social Anthropology Department; it is composed of myself, the Head of Department, Director of Teaching, Exams Officer, and department Admins. These meetings have provided me with a great opportunity to share student feedback directly to staff, and develop action plans to address this feedback.

Twice per semester, I chaired a Student-Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC) meeting: once for undergraduates, and once for postgraduates. In preparation for these meetings, Class Representatives set up feedback surveys for their cohort, and gathered feedback over the course of a week or so. This feedback was then summarised and shared with relevant staff, who responded to this feedback, often taking it on board in their plans for the rest of the semester and for the following year. Both the UG and PG SSCCs were very productive in Semester 1. Key areas of discussion were hybrid teaching, access to print resources, and EDI issues. Both SSCCs will be taking place again in Semester 2, as well.

CLASS REPRESENTATIVES

I have been very fortunate to have a great team of Class Reps this year. Class Rep elections took place in Week 2 of Semester 1 teaching (Undergraduate) and Week 4 (Postgraduate Research), and the following individuals were elected by their peers:

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| First-Year Representatives:   * Isabella Yow * Niamh Molloy   Second-Year Representatives:   * Sherri Makhijani * Taylor Bonnes   Third-Year Representative:   * Siobhan Ali   Fourth- Year Representative:   * Evelyn Benson | Evening Degree Representative:   * Linda Couper   Postgraduate Taught (MRes) Representative:   * Amy Buckley   Postgraduate Research Pre-Fieldwork Rep:   * Nathan McAllister   PGR Post-Fieldwork Reps:   * Sharonne Specker * Lorenzo Sapochetti |

This team has been indispensable, particularly in this very strange year. Through my Class Representative team, I have received crucial and timely information that has helped me to improve support for online-only students and students with disabilities, as well as communicate issues to staff as they arise.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19

Of course, I cannot appropriately summarise this Semester without discussing the effects of COVID-19 on my role as School President, and on the Social Anthropology department as a whole. Like all schools, the Social Anthropology Department lost a great deal of its in-person teaching in Semester 1. In addition to virtual teaching, all meetings and events were moved online and, while this did pose some technical challenges, in many ways it made planning logistically easier.

As in-person teaching was phased in from Week 3, the main feedback from students was that hybrid learning led to a lot of technical issues that often impacted their learning. This feedback was given to staff at the aforementioned SSCC meetings, and I would like to commend Social Anthropology staff for their help and understanding over the last several months as we have all adapted to this new way of being.

SEMESTER 2 PLANS

Like most others, I was hoping that the world would be looking a bit different for the start of the New Year. Yet, as we find our situation much the same as it was in Semester 1, I remain hopeful for my department’s and my fellow academic representatives’ plans.

For my part, I hope to introduce more social events this spring, hopefully taking advantage of platforms such as Icebreaker and Kahoot for game-night-style virtual events. I also hope to hold a few more careers events, namely ‘What Can I Do With an Anthropology Degree?’, an event which will bring Social Anthropology students and alumni together for a Q&A about the careers best supported by experience in Social Anthropology.

Above all, my main aim for the coming semester is to continue doing all I can for my fellow SocAnth students, helping us all to navigate the waters of continued strange circumstances.