



Undergraduate Academic Forum 2022-23

1st December 2022, 6pm
The StAge, Students' Union.

Attendance: Toni Andres – Academic Representation Intern, Tom Bender – School President of Classics, Kirsty Bentley – School President of Chemistry, Taylor Bonnes – School President of Social Anthropology, Robbie Carnegie – School President of Medicine, Ros Claase – Director of Student Experience, Emma Craig – Director of Wellbeing and Equality, Maggie Crookston – School President of Management, Iain Cupples – Student Advocate (Education), Rosa Fricker – School President of History, Zoe Gemmell – School President of Maths, Chase Greenfield – Academic Representation Coordinator, Sam Gorman – Director of Student Development and Activities, Emma Hearn – School President of Psychology and Neuroscience, Patricia Helpap – School President of Environmental and Earth Sciences, Martyna Kemeklyte – Faculty President of Science & Medicine, Claire Lavelle – Assistant Director Student Services: Wellbeing, Francesca Lavelle – Faculty President Arts & Divinity, Sharon Leahy – Associate Dean (Science), Sherri Makhijani -- Vice President of BAME Subcommittee, Kirsty McCall – Director of Teaching IEI, Lara Meischke – Director of Student Services, Catherine Mullner – School President of English, Frank Müller – AVP Dean of Learning and Teaching, Joseph North – Global Office Student Mobility Officer, Sandie Pettifer – Library User Services Manager, Gerald Prescott – Associate Dean Education (Science), Alice Robinson – Language Convenor of Arabic and Persian, Juan Pablo Rodríguez – President of the Students' Association, Noah Schott – Director of Education, Claire Shortt – President of Music Centre, Anna Smith – School President of Philosophy, Ava True – School President of Biology, Robbie Wallace -- School President of Computer Sciences, Fiona Wheelan – Assistant Director Student Services: Disability, Emma Wisher – Assistant Director Libraries, Catriona Wilson – Director of CEEED.

Chair: Noah Schott

Minutes: Toni Andres

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Welcome and Introductions to Staff Members in Attendance

- Noah welcomes everyone.
- All members of staff introduce themselves.

Student Wellbeing in Decline

- *Summary:* Student Representatives have seen general student wellbeing decline and believe that this may be caused by the changes to the academic calendar. Students have struggled to receive support throughout the semester, as Student Services and Wellbeing Officers are overwhelmed. Furthermore, access to support is experienced as incohesive between Schools. Survey results of student opinion concerning the changes to the academic calendar are shared.

General Wellbeing

- Officers highlight that the support and capacity for student wellbeing and signposting varies widely across schools, highlighting how underresourced this area is. It was noted as important to have schools clearly signposting to Student Services, as rumours of lack of appointments with Student Services get around, and are hard to combat without clear information. This is especially important where schools do not have capacity to support with stress of deadlines and extensions.
- These sentiments were repeated for students with support plans in place, some of which are already in frequent contact with Student Services. Disability and Wellbeing Officers are not always clearly advertised. With that should come resourcing to train and support staff members holding these roles to ensure they are ready and able to take on the cases that come to them.
- It was raised that student communities who would have previously been able to share institutional knowledge across cohorts have been hindered in doing this due to a variety of factors. One School noted particular difficulties with the transition of the mentoring scheme to CEED, which they felt had impeded the student input in these programmes which had been vital to its success in previous years. Other Schools noted that this extended to exams, study skills, and professional confidence.
- It was also mentioned that other student initiatives like language cafes in Modern Languages had struggled more than pre-covid, and were requesting that Schools keep in mind the need for additional support as these programmes start up again.

Academic Calendar

- Noah Schott (Director of Education) introduces a survey on student satisfaction with the recent changes to the academic calendar. This survey was run at the end of the academic year 2021/22.
 - o Toni Andres (Academic Representation Intern) presents results from the survey's report:
 - 1,075 students (UG, PGR and PGT, International Education Institute)
 - 83% feel extremely negatively or somewhat negatively about the current structure of the academic calendar.
 - *Effective parts of the academic calendar:* Almost half of all participants (486) would like to see the general structure of S1 maintained with more than half of all participants feeling that the start date of S1 is effective (611).

- *Ineffective parts of the academic calendar:* While almost half of all participants (462) found the two-weeks of revision in S2 effective, more than two thirds (709) participants were dissatisfied with February break (only 80 were satisfied); almost half of all participants (504) found the general structure of S2 ineffective.
 - *General Wellbeing:* Many participants report that they performed poorly in their academic studies and that their mental wellbeing dropped significantly over the academic year due to feelings of isolation and increased pressure. Some report that they felt that the university prioritises financial benefit over their wellbeing.
 - *Students with Disabilities:* Many students with disabilities found their conditions exacerbated by the increased pressure in the shortened Semester 2, having no time to rest during the semester without any Spring Break. Some report that they had to take a Leave of Absence as a result of a variety of reasons that the changed structure of the academic calendar contributed to. Many contacted Student Services more than ever before.
 - *Students with caring responsibilities:* students especially struggled during semester 2 as they felt they had no break during the semester. As revision time was during school children's holidays, students with children struggled to find space and time to revise.
 - *Students with part-time jobs:* found themselves struggling to balance academic work and their jobs.
 - *Participants who are tutoring PG students:* students struggled with the shortened time during semester 2. They did not have enough time for marking during winter break and February Break so they ended up having no break at all.
 - Students felt that *their extracurricular engagement and social capacities* dropped during semester 2 due to increased academic pressure and little time to rest. In Schools, field trips were cancelled that usually ran during Spring Break which impacted students' engagement with an academic community.
 - *Volunteering students:* had issues with time pressure and volunteer programmes running longer than volunteers were able to stay in town due to the shortened Semester 2.
 - *Sports societies and athletes:* brought up that they were unable to compete in major competitions due to the increased workload in the shortened Semester 2 and felt that they had to sacrifice their degrees in order to participate in sports.
 - *Summer-related issues:* While some related that they were unable to secure internships for the summer period, others report that due to the long summer and the ongoing housing crisis, students did not have a place to stay, as they could not stay in their accommodation during the summer.
- Reps emphasised the loss of a week before semester 2 and one week of mid-semester break as having had a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of those completing dissertations, and on the quality of their work, some noting that 12-hour days were the norm in their school. Students resitting exams in early S2 have less time to prepare for these assessments. The increased pressure had been echoed by teaching staff in Schools who felt pressured to complete work on shorter timescales.
 - Postgraduates who teach had noted that they face similar pressures in preparing their work and supporting their students, and they had noticed (in AY 2021/22) increased levels of stress in their students compared to semester 1, and compared to previous years.

- Emma Craig (Director of Wellbeing) raises accommodation issues. Students graduating will have to extend their contracts for an additional month to be able to attend their graduation because other spaces for only that time are too expensive.
 - o Members of staff responded that this issue has not increased with the new academic calendar.
- It was requested that the SA provide a plan for how the academic calendar should be organised, and this plan be presented to the Proctor and Principal's Office. The Education Advocate responded that students were only one of many stakeholder groups, and that this may not be the most helpful way forward. The DoEd added that this research had already been done via the survey presented earlier, which had been developed in partnership between the SA and the university, and that the results of this had been presented to the Proctor at the end of summer.
 - o Iain Cupples (Student Advocate (Education)) responds that research will be done and a proposal that reflects students concerns offered. Iain emphasizes that students are only one stakeholder in this debate which limits how detailed this proposal can be. Students Association cannot speak on staff's behalf.

Learning and Study Spaces

- *Summary:* Individual Representatives relate School-specific issues (related to lab spaces and teaching space requirements). Generally, students are struggling to find study spaces. This is partly caused by restricted access to information regarding available study spaces.
- Reps relayed that teaching and lab spaces had not been fit for the cohort sizes seen this year, which was seen to compromise quality of teaching. This was down to issues with classroom sizes, technology in these spaces, lab capacities, and staff availability. Lab science schools note that they have much less lab time than previous cohorts, and that independent study in labs is virtually non-existent.
- Finding space for independent study has also been noted as a problem, with agreement from all reps that the current state is unlike anything in memory. Cafés are not an option for many students, and oversubscribed for those who are able. It was acknowledged that the library is still under construction, but that the provision of alternative study space wasn't well advertised or accessible.
- The central booking system does not address these issues as there is limited access to buildings.
- Further, students questioned whether the Willie Russell building could be used when it seemed research and teaching activity has ceased. Frank expresses surprise about the information on the Willie Russell Building and commits to asking the DoT for Chemistry about this.
 - o Gerald Prescott (Associate Dean Education for Science) adds that these spaces used to be research labs that have now been dismantled. For this reason, they are not usable currently.
 - o Noah Schott (Director of Education) clarifies that three spaces in the Butts Wynd Building are on the library website which exclude the Old Union Diner. The library spaces page mentions all 7 of the spaces that the library is responsible for: <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/library-spaces/>.
- FindSpace was noted as a tool that is not widely advertised, and not user friendly due to the omission of information vital to use, such as building entry requirements, directions, capacity, occupancy, and others.
- Reps noted that many students, especially those at honours, prefer to work within their own school premises. Many schools do not have independent study space

available, and so School community is lacking. Reps suggested that resources and timetabling practices could be shared to further support Schools that currently do not offer study space.

- Emma Wisher (Assistant Director Libraries) acknowledges the difficulties in finding space in the main library right now. This is part of the rebuilding process. Once the library is re-opened, there will be a 30% increase of available study spaces. The current space that is available is tried to be maximised through opening the teaching room and increased space on level 2. Emma acknowledges situations of students walking for a long time looking for available spaces. The library has a widget available on their home page that has details of live occupancy in the Main Library: http://www-library.st-andrews.ac.uk/occupancy_widget/. Emma emphasises that it is being looked into how this widget can be extended to other spaces that fall under the responsibility of the main library, preferably via an app with other details on facilities available and ways to find spaces.
 - o Support was expressed for occupancy sharing, particularly for the expansion of this into further spaces.
- Frank Müller (AVP Dean of Learning and Teaching) points out that the number of rooms that are retained by Schools is very low. The Old Union Diner for example has rooms that are unoccupied. Students are encouraged to be more “mousy” in looking for spaces. Frank emphasises that the library is being refurbished exactly to solve this issue. As for lectures, it cannot be guaranteed that this will change at any point soon. There is a limited number of lecture halls that accommodate for these sizes of current cohorts.
- Emma Wisher (Assistant Director Libraries): promises to bring this feedback concerning the expressed demand for 24/7 access to libraries to colleagues but this is not on the table currently.

Academic Challenges Post-Covid & Extension Policies and Practices

- *Summary:* School Student Councils have noted that students are struggling to access information regarding requesting extensions. Furthermore, policies concerning extensions vary between Schools. Representatives raise School-specific and general issues that students have been experiencing in accessing academic support.
- Representatives relayed that students have struggled with accessing information regarding applications for extension, and proposed a standardised system across the university. This becomes further pressing considering that Students Services are overworked and cannot make appointments in time for students to be able to back up their claims in requesting extensions. For this reason, students then often contact staff members in the School directly which puts the member of staff who may not be trained for this under strain. This is supported by several Representatives.
 - o Ros Claase (Director of Student Experience): acknowledges comments and re-affirms that a piece of work is being undertaken that looks into what can be done about this at the moment. This will come up at the Learning and Teaching Committee Away Day. Ros expresses appreciation for examples raised by SPs.
- Representatives note that the blanket policy that grants one extension per semester which is currently in place in the School of Economics has been very well received. Similarly, the standardised system of extension policies in the School of Chemistry has been working well.

- Claire Lavelle (Assistant Director Student Services): emphasises that something needs to be done soon. Claire commits to sitting down with staff to communicate the gravity of this situation and how it is impacting students.
- Sharon Leahy (Associate Dean Students): raises that this topic will be discussed at LTC Away Day (Wednesday, 7th December 2022). Noah Schott has organised that some SPs will be attending. Lengths and types of extensions will be addressed. Sharon encourages people to get in touch about further input. Wider consultations with students will also happen.
- Sam Gorman (Director of Student Development and Activities): points out that it has been raised as an issue to Sam that workload is impacting student involvement in the wider community.
 - o Ros Claase (Director of Student Experience): acknowledges this and will bear this in mind. The complexity of reasons that students may have for requesting extensions will be considered.
- Frank Müller (AVP Dean of Learning and Teaching): calls for a change in the dynamic of the conversation. Frank expresses that he would like to move the discussion towards identifying issues and solving them together. Frank says that students come to the university as adults and will be part of a constructive conversation with members of staff. Frank emphasises that extensions do not create time but just shift workload, as there is a correlation between extensions and not finishing work. Frank emphasises that it needs to be addressed what leads to the need for an extension in the first place. Frank points out that members of staff are always impacted by extensions and that some issues may be practical issues such as study spaces. Frank emphasises that it is more profound than this. Frank stresses that there have been enormous spikes in extensions recently which means that study circumstances are suboptimal. This extends to wellbeing: everyone is part of the problem and part of the solution.
- Noah Schott (Director of Education) emphasises that LTC Away Day falls in exam time, so some SPs are unable to attend. Noah points out that often the responses have been that students are not being heard which is why this was on the agenda for UAF.

Tuition fees during placement years and “With Integrated Year Abroad” years

Summary: Students in the Modern Languages and Master Programmes in Biology have expressed dissatisfaction at being charged full tuition fees for years during which they are on placements and hence not in St Andrews.

- Representatives relate students in the Modern Languages and Integrated Master Programmes in Sciences pay full tuition fees during their placements. Despite receiving teaching and support during their placement, this is not the same level of support that they would receive when being a student at university. Representatives raise that paid placements have become for this reason even more competitive and that there is barely any financial support accessible so that students often have to take up a second job.
 - o Joseph North (Student Mobility Officer): explains that these fees are calculated in a credit-based tuition fee system. Students pay because they receive credits. In Modern Languages degrees, students receive half of the academic credits. As for financial aspects, money is available to students on placements such as through the Turing Funding Programme, the RUK Tuition Fee and the Saints Abroad Scholarships. More information can be found via:

<https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/study-abroad/finance/scholarships/>
Applications for these are required.

Open floor and Thanks

- A student raised an individual issue. The Director of Education asked for this issue to be addressed separately outside the meeting.
- Noah Schott (Director of Education) thanks everyone.