

Mathematics and Statistics School President Report – 2017-18 Semester One

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to outline the various activities and initiatives organised by the School President and Class Reps which have been implemented throughout the last semester, and give an overview of future events which are currently being planned. It will also outline several university wide initiatives in which the School President and Class Reps have been involved.

2. SSCC, Education Committee, and Schools Presidents' Forum

The main duty of the School President and Class Reps is to provide feedback from students to staff. One of the main mechanisms for doing this is the SSCC, a twice-per-semester meeting of a committee which includes the Head of School, Director of Teaching, School President, and Class Reps, as well as several other members of academic staff. Throughout this semester, topics discussed at SSCCs have included module feedback, issues concerning equality and diversity, career opportunities, and staff-student events, among others.

The School President also sits on the university-wide Education Committee and School Presidents' Forum. Each Monday evening, one of these committees meets. The Education Committee comprises the 21 School Presidents, 2 Faculty Presidents, and the Students' Association Director of Education. The School Presidents' Forum consists of the same 24 members, with the addition of the Proctor and Deans of Arts and Science. In essence, EduCom is an opportunity for School Presidents to share ideas with each other, while the School Presidents' Forums are intended for providing feedback to senior university officials. Topics discussed during semester one included School Careers Links, The National Student Survey, and Technology Enhanced Learning.

Class Reps have also attended several meetings regarding employability and library usage.

3. Class Reps and module feedback

During the summer it was agreed that some changes would be made to the Class Rep structure. It was decided that the previous '3000/4000 level' and '4000/5000' level positions left ambiguity as to which rep was responsible for a given 4000 level module. Therefore the existing six Honours positions were replaced by: a Junior Honours Rep, responsible for all JH students; a Senior Honours Rep, responsible for independent study modules and final year undergraduate projects; a Pure Honours Rep, Applied Honours Rep, and Stats Honours Rep, responsible for the 4000/5000 level modules in their respective division. These changes, on the whole, seems to have resolved the previous issue of ambiguity. Class reps were elected in week 2.

Following a trial in semester two of the last academic year, we decided to formally implement mid-semester module feedback surveys this year. The surveys were uniform throughout all modules in the School, and consisted of four questions. The first two asked for quantitative answers: the number of hour spent on the module per week, and a rating of the module from 1 to 5. The third question asked what the students liked most about the module, and the final asked what they thought could be improved. Class reps conducted the surveys in week 4, and feedback was discussed at the SSCC in week 5. It was noted that some students did not understand the scale in the question asking to rate the module, and that this question did not provide any meaningful information. Therefore it was decided that it should be removed for the coming semester. The wording of the question asking how many hours are spent on a module per week was also changed to clarify that this figure should include all contact hours. Finally, the wording of the third question has been altered slightly by request of Staff.

Overall, Staff found the feedback from the surveys useful, and the School will be running them again in semester two.

4. Orientation Week and Maths Week Scotland

The School held several induction sessions for students, which included a welcome lecture for entrant students (as well as welcome back lectures for returning students), and a coffee and cakes session which gave new students the opportunity to meet staff.

Orientation Week coinciding with Maths Week Scotland, which this year was held in St Andrews. This consisted of several events aimed at reaching out to the local community. One such event was maths busking on Logie's Lane, which involved sharing some fun maths tricks with passers-by. A mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and staff, volunteered at this event.



Other events included a Special Collections show and tell and a History of Mathematics walk, organised by Staff and postgraduate students in the History of Mathematics division; and a public lecture delivered by Dr Vicky Neale of the University of Oxford on 'Closing the Gap: the quest to understand prime numbers', organised by the Head of School.

Although Class Reps had not been elected at this stage, several of the returning Class Reps from the previous academic year-along with the School President-volunteered at events throughout the week, and maintained an active presence to ensure new students settled in well.

5. Maths Base

Following requests for an undergraduate tutoring initiative, semester one saw the School's launch of Maths Base: a twice-weekly drop in session where undergraduate students can get help with their non-assessed work from senior undergraduates, and postgraduates. While it is not possible to have undergraduates tutor formally, Maths Base allows them to offer support in an informal setting, while supervised by a postgraduate or member of staff. The School President and Class Reps were involved in publicising this event to students, and several also volunteered as tutors. The students that attended all seemed satisfied with the assistance they received.

One issue raised was that both sessions clashed with second year Economics classes. Therefore the timetabling of the sessions will be reviewed for second semester to reduce clashes.

6. Careers events

Three careers events were held during semester one: an internship information event, an undergraduate research forum, and an undergraduate research conference.

The internship information event was held in week 7, and focussed on non-academic placements. Four student speakers who undertook internships the previous summer gave brief talks on their experiences, and advice for students looking for placements for the following year. After the talks, a representative from CAPOD outlined courses offered as part of the Professional Skills Curriculum.

This event was organised by the School President and Employability Rep, in partnership with the Careers Centre. Around 25-30 students attended.

The following day, the School held its annual undergraduate research forum. Here, details of summer research projects, and available funding, were given. Staff representatives from the Pure, Applied, and Stats divisions gave talks on the projects that they offer to summer research students, and outlined the application procedure. Following this, three students who undertook research the previous summer shared their experiences. This event was organised by the School's undergraduate research committee and School President, and attended by a similar number of students to the non-academically focussed one.

In week 8, the School held its inaugural undergraduate research conference: an opportunity for students who have undertaken research to share their findings with fellow undergraduates. Six talks were given: two by Pure mathematics students, two by Applied, and two by Stats. Each talk lasted for 15-20 minutes, with a few minutes given for questions afterwards. A half hour break was given between the third and fourth talks, in which refreshments were provided. Overall the event was very successful, especially for its first year of running, and will hopefully be continued in years to come. This event was co-organised by the School President, previous School President, Senior Honours Rep, and the School's Undergraduate Research Convenor.

7. Equality and Diversity

Issues of equality and diversity are of the utmost importance to the School, therefore it was decided that a dedicated E&D Class Rep would be introduced this year.

It was also agreed between the School's E&D committee and the School President that there should be one student discussion panel per semester. This was held in week 10, and organised by the School President and E&D Class Rep. The discussion was chaired by the School President, and the panellists were the undergraduate E&D Class Rep, the postgraduate representative on the School's E&D committee, the Students' Association PG Convenor, and the School's Director of Teaching. Three main questions were discussed:

- What measures can we take, as individuals and as a School in general, to narrow the attainment gap between male and female students at Honours level?
- What can be done to aid the self-confidence of students?
- While encouraging social interaction is wonderful, it must be done in such a way that people with ASD or social anxiety disorder feel welcome. How best can we encourage social interaction in a way that everyone feels comfortable with?

The Education Committee will be having a working group on equality and diversity at some point early in semester two, and comments from this discussion will be raised there.

Next semester's discussion panel will be part of our annual Equality and Diversity in Mathematics Conference, for which we hope to obtain some external speakers.

8. Social events

Following feedback from students that they would like more opportunities for informal discussion with staff, it was decided that the School would trial a Staff-Student coffee and cakes hour on the Friday afternoon of week 3. This was very well attended and received excellent feedback from both students and staff. As a result of its success, it was decided that two such events would be held per semester. The second took place in week 10, and was attended by a similar number of students.

In revision week, Class Reps organised a free pizza de-stress event. Despite ordering a record volume of pizza, it still disappeared in less than 20 minutes! Thus for next semester the Class Reps will look into the possibility of increasing the budget for the event so no one goes hungry.

9. SUMS events

The university's mathematics society, SUMS have organised several events within the School throughout the semester. Most noteworthy are the series of lunchtime lectures, which have all been well attended. Six took place this semester, and talks were given on topics ranging from paradoxes in mathematics to the statistics in estimating the abundance of endangered species.

They also hosted the annual charity quiz, where a student team takes on representative teams of lecturers from the Pure, Applied and Stats divisions. This year, the Pure team won by two points from the students.

Imperial College organised a UK wide maths challenge, which was aimed as a similar style competition to the Putnam Test in the US. SUMS hosted the St Andrews round, in which ten undergraduates from the School took part.

SUMS also sent a team to PWC's annual quiz, and won! For this they will receive £1000, which they intend to spend on organising more interesting maths events for the coming semester.

10. Internal communication

Email remains the main method for communicating with students. It was decided that this year the School President would send emails on a weekly basis as opposed to whenever new information comes in. Although the 'maths meme of the week' section has received mixed reviews, students appear to be content with having one larger email per week as opposed to several smaller ones.

For the first time, the School trialled using a Facebook group to encourage communication between students. This provided an alternative to email for relaying information from the School President and Class Reps to students. Although it is a more efficient method of communication than email, only 184 of the School's 1083 students are currently members of the group. Therefore all information shared on the page by the School President is a subset of what is communicated via the weekly emails.

The School President Twitter was also reactivated this year, and was briefly trialled as an alternative method of communication. All of the Students' Association sabbatical officers maintain an active presence on Twitter, therefore it has been useful for passing on information from them. However, very few students followed it thus it was not used as a major source of relaying information.

11. Looking forward

Several events are already being organised for the coming semester. These include the inaugural School ball, which is provisionally scheduled for April. The School are also looking at setting up a mentoring scheme for next year. More details on this will be sent out to students in the coming months.