

Summary of feedback on SMSTC opening symposium Perth, 2018

Thank you for all your comments. The Deputy Director and I went through all of them together and will use them to help us next year.

I've included here only the points that were made by two or more people. They're listed in descending order of frequency, i.e. most common points first.

Something you liked about the symposium

- The teaching and marking presentations.
Great! We do them every year and they are important topics to spend time on. You can find the materials on the website: www.smstc.ac.uk/symposia
- Curling
We hope that one day, there will have a mathematician on an Olympic curling team, and they'll have SMSTC to thank.
- Meeting and socializing with other students.
This is one of the main purposes of the symposium. We hope you'll stay in touch with each other, e.g. via seminars, social media, and attending the Burn next academic year.
- The dinner.
- The theme talks.
The ideal for the theme talks is that they both convey practical information and give you a taste of the subject (including how the four modules within each theme relate to one another). We're glad that many of you appreciated this. The Analysis talk was especially popular.
- It was informative and useful.
Good. Again, this is one of the main reasons we run the event.
- The non-theme talks (especially 'How to get a PhD/manage your supervisor'.)
- The hotel.
And apparently 'the poached eggs were divine'.
- The high quality of organization, timetabling and punctuality.
Enormous thanks to Johanna McBryde for organizing everything.
- The lunches.
- Friendly/helpful staff and the opportunity to ask questions.
- Perth.

Something about the symposium that could be improved

- Some of the theme talks were hard to follow.

Understood. Opinions about the theme talks were mixed (see above), but it's the first year we've had themes, so it's unsurprising if some of these presentations were a bit rough around the edges. They should get better as we get used to having themes.

Of course, it's in the nature of mathematics that communicating with a broad audience is hard: try speaking about algebra (say) to a group that contains both people doing a PhD in the subject and people who gave up algebra as soon as they possibly could. But we'll try to rise to the challenge!

- The lunches.

Again, opinions were divided here (see above), and of course it's very much a matter of taste. It's true that the chilli on the first day was extremely spicy, and we'll feed that comment back to Dewars!

A few people objected to the lunches being vegetarian. Inclusivity is important to SMSTC: about 30% of participants were vegetarian or vegan, and we also cater for people observing halaal, kosher or Hindu diets, as well as those allergic to fish or shellfish. Having two vegetarian dishes, one vegan, is a simple way to ensure that everyone has something to eat and most people have a choice of two dishes. Ethics are important to SMSTC too, and ordering vegetarian lunches means we contribute less to climate change and to the lives of abject misery inflicted on animals by the meat industry. Those who choose to eat meat had the option to do so at both dinner and breakfast.

- More tea/coffee breaks (and perhaps shorter lunch breaks).

We agree. This is a good idea and we plan to implement it next year.

- Some of the non-theme talks were too similar to training sessions that Heriot-Watt and Edinburgh students had already received.

We did do some coordination beforehand to make sure this didn't happen, but obviously something went wrong. We've already started investigating.

- Negative comments about particular presentations.

There were a handful of critical comments about various different talks. We put on a different selection of presentations every year and will take these comments into account for next year. Some of your criticisms were specific, constructive, and, therefore, helpful: thank you! Others were essentially of the form 'I didn't like that talk', which doesn't help us so much; as a general rule about giving feedback, the more specific you can be, the better.

- Add some more mathematical talks.

Understood. . . but in some of the other comments, people said they'd like less mathematics in the talks!

- The two ‘pure’ theme talks were on the first day, and the two ‘applied’ theme talks were on the second.

This is a fair point, although the Analysis talk on the first day included applied analysis, and the Probability and Statistics talk on the second day included probability (naturally!), whose position relative to the artificial ‘pure’/‘applied’ dividing line is ambiguous. But yes, it wasn’t ideal. The constraints of staff at a busy time of year do make scheduling a tough problem, but we’ll bear it in mind for next time.

Tom Leinster, SMSTC Director, 5 October 2018