

SMSTC: Summary of student feedback (2022–23)

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This document is a summary of student feedback gathered through the annual online survey. Our comments are italicised; all other opinions expressed are attempts to summarise the students' responses as accurately as possible.

Respondents

The 2023 SMSTC student feedback survey had 25 respondents, a little over 10% of those eligible. Of these respondents, 23 are research students and the remaining two are taught postgraduate students. Most respondents took between one and six SMSTC modules in 2022-23, though one took 10 modules (not necessarily all for assessment). Between them the respondents had a total of 57 core module registrations and 27 supplementary module registrations. There was at least one respondent from each core module, and each supplementary module apart from Quantum Computing. On average, research student respondents spent about 10 hours per week on SMSTC activities (including classes) and 22 hours per week on research.

Around two-thirds (14/22) of the respondents reported that the balance between SMSTC and their other work commitments was about right. Most of the remainder (7/22) would have preferred to spend less time on SMSTC, and one student would have preferred to spend more time on SMSTC.

On average the respondents were registered for roughly 3 modules each, with each module notionally taking around 25% of their working time. Of course, some of these module registrations are students taking classes not for assessment.

Comments on individual modules

There were some comments made on individual modules which have been passed to Theme Heads for their consideration when putting together their reports.

From the more general feedback on modules, there is a clear preference for typed notes made available in advance of lectures, over handwritten notes or notes released only after a lecture.

Tutorial support for core modules is clearly appreciated by students, and an important component of their experience on SMSTC modules. *As has always been the case, tutorial support is provided by your university, not SMSTC, so any issues here are best fed back to your local Postgraduate Director.*

Students also clearly appreciate consistency in the format and style of the material being presented in a given module, and continuity when several lecturers are sharing a module (e.g., making sure it is clear how one part of the module relates to the next and that notation is consistent between different parts of a module). There is a clear preference for modules to have fewer lecturers, to reduce any issues associated with a lack of continuity or consistency.

All of the supplementary modules taken by at least one respondent came in for specific praise, for the content and/or teaching style. Students also appreciated the range of modules offered through SMSTC.

Opening symposium

Out of 16 respondents who are first-year PhD students, 12 attended the opening symposium, (*which this year was a two-day hybrid event held at ICMS, Edinburgh*). Some of those that didn't attend commented that they had not yet arrived to start their PhD at that time.

Of those that did attend, 91% reported enjoying the symposium overall, 75% found the theme talks useful in making module choices, and 82% found the other symposium talks helpful. *This seems to be similar to other recent years*. Two respondents made additional comments about the symposium: one noted its role in building a sense of community, and the other praised the social aspects of the event.

Supporting Postgraduates Who Teach Mathematics and Statistics workshop

Three of the respondents attended this event (*for context, we had 18 students attend this event in total*). Those that did not attend were either travelling at the time of the event, had a clash with another academic activity, were unaware of the event or forgot to register. Of those that did attend, all reported enjoying it and found it helpful.

Research Skills Day

Three of the respondents attended this event, including two that also attended the teaching workshop (*for context, we had 26 students attend in person and 6 attend online in total*). Those that did not attend were either travelling at the time of the event, unaware of the event in time or were too busy with other academic commitments. Of those that did attend, all reported enjoying it, and two out of the three respondents found it helpful. The presentations on unexpected connections, finding information, writing mathematics and giving a mathematical talk came in for particular praise. One respondent suggested a session on building strong collaborations would be useful at a future research skills event, *which is a very good idea*.

Website

60% of respondents reported that the website was “generally easy” to use, and all but one of the remaining respondents that using the website was “generally easy but with occasional problems”. One respondent reported that the website was “generally difficult” to use. Most of the suggested improvements to the website were around the submission of assignments, noting that the assignment submission page can be a little difficult to locate, suggesting that assignment download and submission could be from the same page or that submission pages require fewer clicks to navigate to. Other responses included the suggestion of being able to view course materials without downloading them each time, and the observation that the website can be difficult to use on a mobile device. *We will look into these with our web developer. There were no comments related to the newly-implemented email notifications of assignment submission and feedback release, which we take as a sign that these are working as expected*.

Zoom videoconferencing

88% of respondents reported that Zoom videoconferencing was “generally easy” to use, and all but one of the remaining respondents that it was “generally easy but with occasional problems”. One respondent reported that Zoom videoconferencing was “generally difficult” to use. Only two respondents made any further comments here. One was a request that SMSTC lectures be recorded as standard, to allow students to either catch up on material they have missed or revisit material from earlier in the module. *This is not currently done as standard for both pedagogical and privacy reasons, though*

lecture recordings are made for students with a disability or accessibility need (see our Zoom policy for details). SMSTC teaching has always been on the basis that lectures are live events around which other commitments should be scheduled, rather than on a video-on-demand basis, though we do understand that this causes some issues for some people. We will discuss our policy on lecture recording at the upcoming meeting of our Academic Steering and Management Group. The other comment related to problems with lectures being delivered in a hybrid style (e.g., not being able to hear the in-person audience or lecturer as a remote participant). These kinds of issues may be related to the technical setup in the teaching room being used, and are best flagged during the course of the semester so that the lecturer can get appropriate technical support from their university.

Other comments

One respondent suggested an SMSTC course in category theory. *We have passed this request on to one of our local category theorists.*