

SMSTC: summary of student feedback (2016–17)

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

Respondents

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (49/52) were research students. On average they spent about 11 hours per week on SMSTC activities (including classes) and 20 hours per week on research; 42% would have preferred to spend less time on SMSTC, and 9% would have preferred to spend more time on it. We received responses from students taking every core module (between 4 and 13 responses) but far fewer from students taking supplementary modules.

Individual modules

The numerical responses to most questions on delivery for most modules fell in the range 3–4 (on a scale of 1–5); I have interpreted this as “generally fine”, noting the reported workload and on the assumption that a PG module ought to err slightly on the challenging side. In many cases the written feedback was either very terse or contradictory, so it is hard to identify a clear consensus. The law of small numbers should be borne in mind throughout.

Some modules have more homogeneous cohorts of students than others. For each module, I've recorded the mean μ and standard deviation σ of the responses to “Most of the material was new to me” as a rough indicator of this.

Algebra 1. [$\mu \approx 2.4$; $\sigma \approx 0.6$.] Generally fine, though the material was relatively familiar to students. Some dissatisfaction was expressed with the second half.

Algebra 2. [$\mu \approx 3.8$; $\sigma \approx 1.0$.] Generally fine, though the assessments were perceived as hard and there was some dissatisfaction with aspects of the lecturing.

Applied Analysis & PDEs 1. [$\mu \approx 4.1$; $\sigma \approx 1.4$.] Generally fine.

Applied Analysis & PDEs 2. [$\mu \approx 3.4$; $\sigma \approx 1.3$.] Generally fine. One request for more advanced topics to be covered.

Applied Mathematics Methods 1. [$\mu \approx 3.6$; $\sigma \approx 0.9$.] Generally fine. Mostly positive comments about delivery, though lectures 6–8 were identified as problematic.

Applied Mathematics Methods 2. [$\mu \approx 3.8$; $\sigma \approx 0.8$.] Generally fine, though less positive than AMM1; a couple of negative comments about the lectures.

Geometry & Topology 1. [$\mu \approx 2.6$; $\sigma \approx 1.8$.] Generally fine, though one student objected strongly to having an assignment over the winter break.

Geometry & Topology 2. [$\mu \approx 2.5$; $\sigma \approx 1.0$.] The material was seen as relatively familiar but the pace was rapid. One complaint about errors in the second assignment.

Mathematical Models 1. [$\mu \approx 4.0$; $\sigma \approx 0.7$.] Generally fine. Very positive comments about the delivery.

Mathematical Models 2. [$\mu \approx 4.0$; $\sigma \approx 1.0$.] Mostly fine, but workload was seen as high; too many topics and too much background knowledge was assumed by some lecturers.

Probability 1. [$\mu \approx 3.3$; $\sigma \approx 0.9$.] Generally fine. No written feedback.

Probability 2. [$\mu \approx 3.7$; $\sigma \approx 0.9$.] Generally fine. No written feedback.

Pure Analysis 1. [$\mu \approx 3.3$; $\sigma \approx 1.3$.] Generally fine. Positive comments on the delivery, but the lack of exercise solutions was objected to.

Pure Analysis 2. [$\mu \approx 4.0$; $\sigma \approx 1.0$.] Generally fine, but the pace and workload may have been on the challenging side; the lack of exercise solutions was objected to.

Statistics 1. [$\mu \approx 3.4$; $\sigma \approx 1.2$.] Generally fine.

Statistics 2. [$\mu \approx 4.1$; $\sigma \approx 1.1$.] Very positive comments.

Supplementary modules. The numbers of respondents were small and there were very few comments, although these were generally positive.

As in previous years, the provision of tutorial support differed substantially between modules and (presumably) institutions; it has not been broken down further here.

SMSTC generally

Symposium. 55% of respondents had attended the symposium; most of those who didn't attend had started their PhDs (or arrived in the UK) too late to participate. Almost all who attended had enjoyed it; a majority found the stream talks had helped them choose their modules, and a larger majority had found the other talks helpful. There were some minor complaints about the room in which the talks were held.

Overall. Some students (particularly from MIGSAA) objected to the workload, particularly to being obliged to take three modules for assessment when they would rather have been starting their projects. Videoconferenced lectures were criticised, with some students requesting more interactive use of the VC and/or face-to-face teaching instead. There were complaints both that the level of SMSTC was too high and that it was too basic.

Summary and interpretation. The overall pattern is similar to that for last year, though feedback on individual modules is less stable. Some supervisors and students may not be aware of the flexibility of SMSTC provision or of the expectations in terms of workload; we should continue to advertise this. Interactive use of the VC system is generally popular, and we should continue to encourage this. Finally, the timing of the 2016 Symposium, which was held in September for financial reasons, was problematic for many students; the return to a date in October ought to avoid these problems next year.