

SMSTC: summary of student feedback (2017–18)

David Pritchard

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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. Numbers in brackets are last year's figures for comparison.

Respondents

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (47/49) were research students. On average they spent about 10 [11] hours per week on SMSTC activities (including classes) and 19 [20] hours per week on research; 40% [42%] would have preferred to spend less time on SMSTC, and 2% [9%] would have preferred to spend more time on it. We received responses from students taking every core module (between 3 and 20 responses) but rather fewer (between 0 and 8 responses) from students taking supplementary modules. Not all those who responded that they had taken a module provided feedback on it.

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.

Groups, Rings and Modules [Algebra 1]. ($\mu \approx 3.6$ [2.4]; $\sigma \approx 1.34$ [0.6].) Mostly fine, though students were less familiar with it than last year and found it tougher. There were complaints about the second assignment (both the level and the time taken to mark it).

Algebras and Representation Theory [Algebra 2]. ($\mu \approx 3.8$ [3.8]; $\sigma \approx 1.6$ [1.0].) Generally fine, though one respondent was annoyed by the strike disruption.

Dynamical Systems and Conservation Laws [Applied Analysis & PDEs 1]. ($\mu \approx 3$ [4.1]; $\sigma \approx 1.4$ [1.4].) Generally fine, with some positive comments about the lecturer.

Elliptic and Parabolic PDEs [Applied Analysis & PDEs 2]. ($\mu \approx 4.67$ [3.4]; $\sigma \approx 0.58$ [1.3].) Generally fine; no written comments.

Asymptotic and Analytical Methods [Applied Mathematics Methods 1]. ($\mu \approx 4.3$ [3.6]; $\sigma \approx 1.22$ [0.9].) Generally fine; both positive and negative comments about one specific lecturer.

Numerical Methods [Applied Mathematics Methods 2]. ($\mu \approx 3.7$ [3.8]; $\sigma \approx 1.0$ [0.8].) Generally fine, but some concerns (pacing and the focusing of the document camera) over lectures 5–8.

Algebraic Topology [Geometry & Topology 1]. ($\mu \approx 3.8$ [2.6]; $\sigma \approx 1.1$ [1.8].) Positive responses and comments.

Manifolds [Geometry & Topology 2]. ($\mu \approx 3.43$ [2.5]; $\sigma \approx 1.0$ [1.0].) Generally fine; no written comments.

Continuum Mechanics [Mathematical Models 1]. ($\mu \approx 4.4$ [4.0]; $\sigma \approx 0.5$ [0.7].) Generally fine, though there were some complaints about the assignments, and one student suggested a completely different structure for the module.

Mathematical Biology and Physiology [Mathematical Models 2]. ($\mu \approx 3.0$ [4.0]; $\sigma \approx 2.8$ [1.0].) Very small number of responses; no written comments.

Foundations of Probability [Probability 1]. ($\mu \approx 4.25$ [3.3]; $\sigma \approx 0.9$ [0.9].) Very positive comments.

Stochastic Processes [Probability 2]. ($\mu \approx 4.33$ [3.7]; $\sigma \approx 0.7$ [0.9].) Generally fine; one request for exercise solutions to be provided “progressively”.

Measure and Integration [Pure Analysis 1]. ($\mu \approx 4.3$ [3.3]; $\sigma \approx 0.7$ [1.3].) Generally fine; some very positive comments and some concerns about presentational matters.

Functional Analysis [Pure Analysis 2]. ($\mu \approx 4.3$ [4.0]; $\sigma \approx 0.9$ [1.0].) Some students seem to have struggled with the assignments and felt that the level of demand was too high.

Regression and Simulation Methods [Statistics 1]. ($\mu \approx 2.4$ [3.4]; $\sigma \approx 0.6$ [1.2].) Generally fine; positive comments.

Modern Regression and Bayesian Methods [Statistics 2]. ($\mu \approx 4.2$ [4.1]; $\sigma \approx 0.8$ [1.1].) Generally fine, but one strongly negative comment about the delivery.

Supplementary modules. The numbers of respondents were small and there were very few comments.

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. 67% [55%] of respondents had attended the symposium. There were a variety of reasons for not attending: worryingly, one stated that it clashed with their PG induction day and one that they had a meeting with their supervisor. Almost all who attended (96%) had enjoyed it; a majority (64%) found the stream talks had helped them choose their modules, and a larger majority (71%) had found the other talks helpful.

Overall. The main subject of complaint was the VC lectures: several students suggested that lecturers should consider more carefully how the notes and the lectures complemented each other, and that classes needed to be made more interactive. Several comments mentioned the disruption due to the strike, which evidently caused annoyance to some students.

Summary and interpretation. *This year more respondents found the material in most modules unfamiliar, and the UCU strike disruption clearly had an effect on some semester 2 modules. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of responses is familiar. Some comments suggest that students are not fully aware of the prerequisites for modules and thus of the likely level of the material; we should encourage students and supervisors to refer to the Prospectus before choosing their modules. Delivery by VC remains problematic: some lecturers have apparently found ways to make this work, but it requires careful thought about how material is provided and how interaction is encouraged.*

The clashes reported with the SMSTC Symposium suggest lack of institutional support for SMSTC in some quarters, which is worrying. Another worrying issue is that students report spending relatively little time on SMSTC but a strong minority would like to spend less. The 49 responders had a total of 153 core module registrations and 28 supplementary module registrations; the core modules alone should have totalled around 15 hours per week (on the basis of 10 hours per module per week for a semester). This suggests that SMSTC is still seen by many as a formality that should not be allowed to impinge upon the real business of being a PhD student, rather than as an integral part of the PhD process.