

SMSTC: summary of student feedback (2018–19)

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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 (39/40) were research students. On average they spent about 13 hours per week on SMSTC activities (including classes) and 21 hours per week on research; 53% would have preferred to spend less time on SMSTC, and 3% would have preferred to spend more time on it. *(Between them the respondents had 128 core module registrations and 18 supplementary module registrations; at an average of 3.4 registrations per student, they would notionally have been expected to spend roughly 17 hours per week on SMSTC activities.)*

We received responses from students taking every core module (between 1 and 12 responses) and all but one supplementary module.

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.

Groups, Rings and Modules. There was some disagreement about whether the group theory was too advanced or too basic.

Algebras and Representation Theory. One respondent suggested they felt there was a lack of motivation.

Dynamical Systems and Conservation Laws. The second half was more popular than the first.

Elliptic and Parabolic PDEs. Some respondents were dissatisfied with the final part of the course and reported delay issuing the third assignment.

Asymptotic and Analytical Methods. Generally positive comments, although one respondent found it “a bit disjointed”.

Numerical Methods The first part of the module was generally popular; there were both positive and negative comments about the second part.

Algebraic Topology. Generally positive comments, though some respondents found it challenging.

Manifolds. Several respondents suggested that there was too much material. (The numerical responses suggested that this was the most challenging module for students.)

Continuum Mechanics. Generally positive comments, though first part was more popular than the second.

Mathematical Biology and Physiology. This module suffered particularly from technical issues.

Foundations of Probability. Some respondents suggested covering less material but in more depth.

Stochastic Processes. There were both strongly positive and some quite negative comments; no clear picture emerged.

Measure and Integration. There were both strongly positive and some quite negative comments; no clear picture emerged.

Functional Analysis. Generally positive, but some respondents suggested the pace was too fast.

Regression and Simulation Methods. No comments.

Modern Regression and Bayesian Methods. No 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. 77% of respondents had attended the symposium; most of those who didn't attend had started their PhDs (or heard about SMSTC) too late to participate. Almost all who attended had enjoyed it; a small majority found the theme talks had helped them choose their modules, and a larger majority had found the other talks helpful. One respondent complained vigorously about the lack of meat on the lunch menu.

Overall. Several respondents mentioned the technical problems with the video-conferencing service this year. There were complaints both that the level of SMSTC was too high and that it was too basic. Some responses suggested that respondents did not fully understand what was on offer: for instance, there was a call to include fluid dynamics (which is already part of the Continuum Mechanics module) and a complaint that SMSTC wasn't available to second-year students (it is).

Summary and interpretation. The overall pattern is similar to that for last year. 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.

Uptake of the questionnaire was quite low this year despite repeated requests to students to complete it. I would welcome suggestions of more effective methods of gathering (meaningful) feedback from students.