

# SMSTC: summary of student feedback (2019–20)

David Pritchard (david.pritchard@strath.ac.uk)

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*This document is a summary of student feedback. My comments are italicised; all other opinions expressed are attempts to summarise the students' responses as accurately as possible. Quotations are verbatim and are intended to be illustrative.*

## Overview

*This year we requested anonymised written comments via the student reps in each department, in the hope that this would give more informative feedback than the online survey and involve less administrative work.*

*Feedback was received from students at Glasgow, the Maxwell Institute (Edinburgh/Heriot-Watt), and Strathclyde. The number of comments was fairly small, and includes two respondents who emailed me directly: I have included their comments but anonymised them. Comments on individual modules have been passed to the Theme Heads and are not repeated here; comments on local arrangements (tutorials and facilities) have been passed to the local PG Co-ordinators and are also not repeated here. I have summarised the comments by topic.*

## Workload and level of provision

A wide range of opinions were expressed on this topic. Most respondents reported that the workload for most modules was reasonable and that they had generally benefited from the modules that they had taken. One such respondent summed it up: "I feel like this is the sort of thing where you get out what you put in, which is as it should be for courses at this level."

However, there was a group of respondents who were strongly discontented with the content and level of SMSTC modules. These respondents were typically from a 'pure' background, with particular emphasis on Algebra. Their main objections were the following.

- (a) That the 'broadening' purpose of SMSTC is not appropriate for them. To quote one respondent: "The goal of SMSTC to "widen people's knowledge" should be changed as nobody in pure maths wants to "widen their knowledge" by taking courses in distant subjects, that's what undergrad was for."
- (b) That the modules in their area of interest are pitched at too low a level. It was common for these respondents to state that the Structure & Symmetry core modules were at undergraduate level or involved "no prerequisites", and that "everybody" doing a maths PhD should already know this material.
- (c) That it would be more appropriate for SMSTC to provide focused specialist modules closely related to their research interests. (A few respondents suggested curricula for such modules.)

These objections appear to be shared by some supervisors, as one respondent noted: "the only reasonable thing would be to ignore SMSTC completely (as our supervisors told us to do from the very beginning on)".

*Item (a) reflects a major problem of expectations. As we make clear at the opening symposium and in all the information we provide, SMSTC was established and receives its funding specifically to provide 'broadening' training. It is disappointing that after more than a decade some students and their supervisors do not accept that this is its purpose.*

*Item (b) is not supported by the evidence. Although the Structure & Symmetry core modules are intended to be accessible to non-specialists they do presume degree-level knowledge, and most mathematics PhD students in Scotland do not come from a background in which all these topics have been covered at undergraduate or even at master's level. It is natural to overgeneralise from one's own experience, but mathematics is a more diverse subject, with a greater variety of UG experiences, than many of these respondents realise.*

*Item (c) offers a possible way forward. Through the supplementary modules, SMSTC can provide the specialist training that is requested; we are happy to be flexible in the format of such modules and any assessment that is necessary for departments to award credit for them. However, we need somebody to offer these modules. There appears to be at least one research community who feel under-represented in SMSTC provision but who are reluctant to propose any modules in their area. I would welcome suggestions on how we can reach out to people in this community and encourage them to engage constructively with SMSTC.*

## **Technological issues**

Several respondents reported problems with the video-conferencing system, especially at the start of the year; the frequency of problems seems to have reduced as time went on. Calls not connecting were the most general issue; there also seem to have been issues with particular pieces of kit at individual sites, including document cameras and smart whiteboards.

*The VScene video-conferencing system has been unreliable for a couple of years now. It seems likely that we will be forced in any case to migrate to a more flexible platform next year to accommodate the expected need for more off-campus teaching.*

*There is a widespread misapprehension among students — and possibly among some staff — that SMSTC is responsible for local VC kit and that we have a sufficient budget to upgrade it regularly. I wish the latter were the case; unfortunately it is not!*

One respondent suggested that we should record lectures and make them available on the website.

*We have avoided this approach both because of the resources required, because it raises issues around privacy and intellectual property, and most importantly because it would undermine our attempts to make SMSTC classes as interactive as possible. We recognise that expectations and practices are changing rapidly as universities make more use of online teaching, and we will keep this under review, but for the moment the negatives outweigh the positives.*

## **Opening symposium**

The opening symposium received uniformly positive feedback; the element that was most strongly praised was the opportunity to get to know other PhD students.

*It is unfortunate that the symposium is the element of SMSTC most likely to be jeopardised by the ongoing pandemic. As we explore alternatives, we will bear in mind that the social function of the symposium is the most highly valued aspect.*

## **Organisation**

A few respondent expressed frustration about “lack of organisation”, but without specifics it is hard to know what was meant here. For those who did give more details, the main source of irritation was that they did not know what was compulsory: “There was a lack of clarity as to how many modules students HAD to do, and how much was just for this concept of broadening the mathematical area.”

*We try to be clear that SMSTC does not require anybody to do anything. Requirements on the number of modules are set by individual departments. I'd welcome any suggestion of how we can get this message across!*

*As noted above, I think that distinguishing between which modules are “required” and which are for “broadening” represents a basic confusion about the purpose of SMSTC.*