

SMSTC: summary of student feedback (2020–21)

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This document is a summary of student feedback gathered through the online survey. Our 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 (35/37) were research students, the remaining two were taught postgraduate students. On average they spent about 10.5 hours per week on SMSTC activities (including classes) and 19 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. Between them the respondents had a total of 81 core module registrations and 25 supplementary module registrations.

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

We received responses from students taking every core module (between 1 and 9 responses) and all supplementary modules (between 2 and 5 responses). There were some comments made on individual modules which have been passed to Theme Heads for their consideration when putting together their reports. In general there were relatively few comments on specific modules, and some of these comments were contradictory, making it difficult to give a clear picture. For example there were specific modules that came in for both particular praise and particular criticism from a small number of individual students.

More general feedback on modules was also contradictory in places: one student commented that “having a number of different teaching staff for the module made it more engaging” and another said that there was “inconsistency due to change of lecturers”. Unfortunately neither of these students named the modules they were referring to in these comments, making it hard to identify any pattern. Similarly, there were a mix of comments on how useful students found tutorials, but a lack of specificity makes it hard to identify which particular models for tutorial provision worked well.

Of the supplementary modules, History of Mathematics came in for particular praise.

Symposium

72% of respondents attended the opening symposium. Those that did not attend were either unaware of the symposium in time, or cited a large amount of other work to do as a reason for non-attendance. Of those that did attend, the majority found the theme talks useful in making module choices, and the vast majority found the other symposium talks helpful. *This seems to be similar to other (non-online) years.*

Website

Around 68% of respondents reported that the website was “generally easy” to use, and the remaining 32% that using the website was “generally easy but with occasional problems”. No-one reported that the website was “generally difficult” to use. Most of the suggested improvements to the website were around

the submission of assignments, particularly requests for clear confirmation that submitted work had been received. *We will look into implementing this over the summer.* Other suggestions included email notification when feedback is released and better organisation of teaching materials for some modules.

Zoom videoconferencing

Around 76% of respondents reported that Zoom videoconferencing was “generally easy” to use, and the remaining 24% that it was “generally easy but with occasional problems”. No-one reported that Zoom videoconferencing was “generally difficult” to use. Specific problems mentioned were mainly down to choices made by individual lecturers (e.g., no break in a two-hour lecture, or writing on a whiteboard not clearly visible over webcam) rather than problems with Zoom itself. Some students noted that it is difficult to concentrate for a two-hour lecture held over Zoom, and that Zoom lectures make it harder to hold a discussion (either with the lecturer or between students). *In light of this year’s experiences we will update guidance for staff over the summer.*

Other comments

- One student noted that several assignments are recycled from year to year, and felt that this can lead to unfairness in the assignments for individual students.
- One student raised issues around illness and what happens if a student is unable to work for an extended period.
- One student raised issues about systems in place for reporting disabilities to SMSTC, and whether this can be done automatically through departments or should be initiated by the student.

We are currently looking into ways to handle notifications of illness and of disability, to ensure we do all we can without violating privacy and data protection principles.