

MSc Staff Student Liaison Committee Meeting

4pm-5pm, Thursday 3rd September 2020

Online, Microsoft Teams

Present: B. Franke (MSc Year Organiser), L. Seal (MSc Administrator), R. Finlayson (MSc Teaching Secretary), T. Loderhose (MSc Rep)

1. Introduction and overview of SSLC

The meeting opened with a brief introduction on the purpose of the meeting, mainly to gain feedback to help enhance student's experience and to offer student representatives a chance to talk to the Year Organiser directly.

It was also noted that due to COVID-19 Pandemic, the University's central feedback team cancelled all Course Enhancement Questionnaires (CEQs) for Semester 2.

2. Comments on MSc Courses

AIPF

Responses suggest students satisfied overall, but it is a small sample though

What can be improved?

- Process for students to raise issues with their feedback / grade
- Everything is very inconsistent. Some things marked well. Some things not. When you point out problems with the marking the response is "sorry we can't make adjustments to this"

What is good?

- The course materials in general.
- Overall there is some great opportunities to learn

What is bad?

- not much
- No real socialisation or connections with other students. It's very isolating. It's also all-consuming. Don't expect to do anything else

Any additional comments?

- N/A

ATFD

No responses regarding this course.

AV

What can be improved?

- The exam was much harder than any of the content

What is good?

- No responses

What is bad?

- No responses

Any additional comments?

- No responses

BIO2

Most responses suggest students were generally happy this course.

What can be improved?

- The course can focus on more computational part and practical applications.
- Nothing specific

What is good?

- Instructor was great. The materials are good.
- Dr. Ian Simpson is the best teacher for the course. He just helps out in every way possible.

What is bad?

- Coursework could be more computational instead of rushing over softwares and websites.
- Nothing specific

Any additional comments?

- I believe improving the course in computational part would be awesome. I took Bio1 and Bio2 but I still do not know how we process biology data in terms of machine learning and other applications.

CCN

What can be improved?

- The labs can be improved.
- More labs would be good

What is good?

- Peggy is really good and passionate
- Instructor, teaching material

- The lectures and the labs were amazing. The 3rd assignment was really cool, too.

What is bad?

- A lot of overlap with Neural Computation
- Courseworks were too heavy, especially the first one. It was thesis work from last year yet we were expected to do it in a month with a lot of other courseworks as well
- The first assignment was a pain to get through and it appears to be mostly because of how it was planned

Any additional comments?

- I learnt a lot from the course itself but I believe the structure should be improved.

CQI

No responses regarding this course.

DATAVIS

What can be improved?

- No responses

What is good?

- Benjamin is very motivated, his tutorials are great!
- Ben's enthusiasm

What is bad?

- No responses

Any additional comments?

- No responses

DME

What can be improved?

- The lab tutors knew nothing about the subject and weren't any help. The coursework materials were quite old.
- The group work can drag your mark down and there is nothing you can do about it
- Teaching support in labs

What is good?

- The lecturer puts a lot of effort into the lectures, with quizzes etc.
- Explanation of lab materials and generally the coordination of labs, where we get hands on experience with pandas and sklearn library

What is bad?

- Available projects seem a bit outdated, they should be more recent
- **Any additional comments?**
- No responses

DMR

No responses regarding this course.

IPP

A nice bell curve of responses, with most students having a positive response to the course.

What can be improved?

- Trivial class, I didn't learn anything new.
- Not enough space. Should be more flexible with the space so you can include graphs/diagrams etc which are important for planning
- Planning and consistency across tutorial groups

What is good?

- Every member of staff involved was very helpful. Feedback was fair.
- Could send a draft to both my tutor and my supervisor, which was nice.
- My TA was really good at explaining things
- individual help if when it was needed

What is bad?

- Conflict between the supervisor and tutor. One once simplicity one wants technical detail and they don't communicate for the marks
- general attitude of students towards the course - more challenge needed?

Any additional comments?

- No responses

MI

What can be improved?

- No responses

What is good?

- No responses

What is bad?

- parts of course dated, very slow response on queries

Any additional comments?

- CW1 feedback was never returned, so unclear what would be considered good for CW2

PMR

This seems like a popular course and students seem happy with it for the most part.

What can be improved?

- The lecture is quite abstract and it's not clear where things will be used. It would be nice if there was at least 10-20% marked assignments, so that the practical side becomes more clear.
- More indication of how I am going in the course. I have mixed feelings about more compulsory assessment - I liked just having the exam. But maybe some assessed tutorials or a mock exam would help.

What is good?

- Lecturer and TAs very nice and helpful
- The coursework was helpful.

What is bad?

- No responses

Any additional comments?

- No responses

RL

What can be improved?

- The lectures (not in terms of content/slides but their explanation)
- The coursework was very well prepared but it was far too time consuming. The lectures were somehow a little difficult to follow. Found the same material much easier to follow watching other lecturers online.

What is good?

- The assignment was really interesting

What is bad?

- Most of the lectures

Any additional comments?

- No responses

RLSC

No responses regarding this course.

THE

What can be improved?

- No responses

What is good?

- Maria is a great lecturer. Materials were very good.
- So easy and nothing to much

What is bad?

- I don't think the course is that much valuable for a Master's level.

Any additional comments?

- No responses

3. Comments on Other Courses

MLP

There were a lot of issues with feedback for this course, which lasted across both semesters.

What can be improved?

- Courseworks, instructors, markers, labs...

What is good?

- No responses

What is bad?

- The courseworks were too heavy. Instructors were not so helpful. The grades were not even fair.

Any additional comments?

- No responses

NLU+

Most students seemed generally happy with this course.

What can be improved?

- I wanted more "cool" assignments. More of a project than just implementing standard neural net architectures.
- NLU+ labs in the beginning could be about pytorch and deep learning programming

What is good?

- Lecturers are very nice and helpful. They were always willing to discuss a topic further after lectures.
- The lectures were pretty good

- own choice of project leads to interesting research
- Antreas' help desk

What is bad?

- No responses

Any additional comments?

- No responses

MSc Project

Most students were happy with their supervisors. The Piazza groups that were set up were never used; you couldn't write content. We talked about this in weekly rep meetings (about how to improve engagement) and this came up as a solution but it never really came to life.

BF: Sometimes things like this come to life, sometimes they don't. I can only say what it was meant to be, which was a discussion and engagements tool, and to discuss thematic issues that don't need to be discussed with entire cohort.

What can be improved?

- The deadline for self-proposed projects should be later, or should be advertised sooner.
- I wish I had more opportunity to present my work to others
- More support rather than just basically a weekly almost "test" to pass
- Professors should state their availability limitations before our project selection becomes permanent.
- some guidelines/FAQ on how to best make use of supervision

What is good?

- Weekly meetings are very good, my supervisor knew a lot about the topic and helped me a lot.
- Had really good communication both with my supervisors and with my teammates
- It was awesome to have a lot of control over a project and pursue my interests. It was also great being part of a research lab and hearing about others' work. The group also gave me morale in the face of COVID-19 restrictions.
- Weekly meetings and possibility to discuss a change in the direction of the project after the start date

What is bad?

- In the beginning I first couldn't share anything on Blackboard Collaborate.
- Sometimes it seemed like my supervisor did not have a good sense of where my project was headed, and suggested things late that would change the project too much.
- piazza groups were never used for anything - so essentially it was everyone for themselves

Any additional comments?

- No responses

4. General Issues about the Year and Specific Courses

These responses include COVID-19-related stress. The comments regarding the Cyber Security course are a small sample size, but as a small degree programme, it's still like 20% of the cohort. I was a lucky and had a good group of people around me. Some people did not come to me, even though they knew I was a Rep. A lot of things were cancelled, but I think it would be good to make sure there is increased action to connect with students, and get them connected with each other.

BF: Unfortunately there will always be some students who are missed, but we are on it in terms of getting students for the coming year connected the best we can

Responses

- Personally, found this semester extremely stressful because of Covid-19. Had to move across Europe with very short notice which caused a nightmare situation during assignment and exam season. However, I must applaud the university for taking many steps that were very very helpful in lessening academic worries.
- I think the University and the School handled it quite well
- Overall, students need a gateway to express their grievances concerning course feedback
- I was generally unimpressed with the amount of communication and engagement from the school of Informatics during the dissertation writing phase. While my supervisor was accessible, I would have expected more contact from the school than a weekly Skype meeting with one person and the occasional admin email. While it is not obvious what should have been done, there should be more to facilitate student engagement if remote learning is to continue for next year.
- Cyber security degree feels somewhat fragmented; courses in several different schools but no "tying together" of topics. Very limited introduction to cybersecurity industry.
- The stressfulness did not come from the coursework, just from the general situation.
- The workload was excessive and I had to work most days throughout the semester, even on weekends.
- Went from isolated to awfully isolated
- Covid-related stress worsened the situation. Being in contact with our fellow students makes a huge difference in my progress and stress handling. This should be taken into account if this year's courses will be moved online.

5. Comments on Computer Facilities

There was talk about asking to hire out computer equipment when the lockdown hit, but this was a lot harder to realise than it seems on paper.

Responses

- Facilities for students are very good. However, Appleton Tower could do with a few more GPU machines. During assignments, it was tough to find a free GPU.
- MLP cluster randomly deleting stuff and support suggesting to use GCP because they don't know what is wrong with it
- Would have been nice to give students access to screens/keyboards etc. during the pandemic.
- We need microwaves, especially because we have to stay there for extended periods of time!
- Good except for access to and using the cluster

6. Comments on labs, study spaces and social spaces

There are a range of responses about this, and it mostly comes down to there not being enough space.

BF: Unfortunately capacity will be massively reduced in Appleton Tower in the coming year, due to government guidance and rules above all else. We're doing what we can, but unfortunately the School is restricted a lot here – but it is all in the name of student safety.

Responses

- Lack of study spaces during the day
- Finding study space can be used extremely challenging.
- Generally not enough space
- Always loud. There isn't many places you can just sit without distractions and without a lab computer in front of you

7. Comments on Computing Support

Responses

- Always very quick at replying
- Always helpful!
- Very helpful and quick!

8. Comments on ITO Support

Responses

- Very helpful whenever I needed help.

9. AOB

BF: Overall it wasn't catastrophic in terms of what we delivered. It's hard to plan for a pandemic so it would probably be fair to say that we were winging it in some regards; it's about working out the best solution to problems we may not have anticipated.

Tim: Regarding the whole handling of things, students seemed happy with the no detriment policy. There was a lot of potential to mess up and that didn't happen. There might have been some more official emails, even just to say things are being figured out; a lot of speculation circulated, but once guidance was set in stone people were happy. I think the response to situation was good given how uncertain everything is and was.

BF: It's good to hear the University got something right, especially where other national exam boards didn't fare so well...

Tim: The curve of marks will certainly change compared to recent trends

BF: Exam averages have gone up slightly, and project marks remain to be seen since they were only handed in last week and still need to be marked. This is expected and is okay and owed to the situation. I would like to know what was your personal experience of the whole year was?

Tim: Lots of mixed feelings, both as a student and as a Rep. In general I thought there was a lot of good course offerings that are broad but specific, even though some courses weren't brilliant. I also liked the Machine Learning courses. MLP was a big stress inducer for myself and others, and I think in general that course could have been done better. The workload in Semester 1 was quite intense, which is also from what I heard from others.

Looking back, I didn't really see anything of Edinburgh as a city, which is partly because I left at the end of March, but even before then I didn't get a chance to fully explore. I was back to hand in my Dissertation, and some friends and I had a closing trip, which was nice. Mostly during term times though, I was between home, uni, and the gym. The whole work-life balance wasn't great and I was warned by the student who recommended this course of this and by others (and by yourself as Year Organiser at the start of term).

The best thing was meeting new people, and I hope many others got the same experience, but I am glad to have met intelligent and driven people at this university. I think generally this is the case with MSc students (but might just be Edinburgh University), but it wasn't like this for my Bachelors. The usefulness of this degree is from having this group of people and peers to talk to down the line, this very broad group of people.

The number one bad thing was the workload and how the School respond to certain issues. The Common Marking Scheme, for example. I knew it took some adjustment for me; higher

numbers here are worth less than where my Bachelors was done. People should focus on the learning and not on the grading- and I did learn a lot.

Also the beginning of the MSc Representatives; it wasn't started in an ideal way, with a lot of uncertainty. It took a while to email the group of Reps so and get things off the ground so they could introduce themselves to the students.

BF: We don't have reps yet but we have Programme Directors this coming academic year. We have decided to break down the MSc cohorts, and for each programme there will be a Director. This way they can interact with smaller groups, and different Reps for different degrees. It's all part of having ongoing engagement and not just having all the workload hinged on one person. This is also being applied to courses like IRR, where we are grouping people from the same degrees together, so there is more interaction.

Tim: Has the degree package changed? We discussed in a previous meeting that the degree attained doesn't necessarily equate to what you studied.

BF: The course choices this year will be less – and this is across all years, which are running 30/40% less courses. Each course will be run by at least two lecturers so that there's always a backup. The team would also be responsible for shifting all content online. I am aware that the students appreciate the breadth of choices we offer, but in this coming year we can't offer that, mainly just so courses don't collapse if the Course Organiser gets ill

So this year will look a lot different. All lectures will be online; the largest lecture room we have (in Appleton Tower) now has a capacity of 29, due to social distancing guidelines being adhered to. We will still be running tutorials, some on campus and some online. There will be a lot less in-person contact, but we are ramping up engagements, seeing how we can more regularly be in touch with students. I hope that this is something that will last. What we introduce now will last into long term. I think we need to make sure in an online world we don't lose the networking aspect.

Tim: If Covid-19 wasn't a thing I would say to the next Reps that I wish we had events way in the beginning of the year to allow students to meet people. To think that that won't be able to meet people is sad and unfortunate. I hope it goes well for people who are set to study in the coming year and the whole stress that is there with this degree

BF: Yes and that is tricky and we will see. Students may be away and it will be harder for us to engage. It will be harder for people to notice those who drop out too, which is unfortunate. Personal Tutors are still there though. That will be the same for this coming year. But generally in a normal year, for maybe 80% of students PTs would see them once, but for 20% of students that is more frequently.

Tim: I think with Covid-19 there could be more effort from PTs to engage with students

BF: I agree. I think this is why we have Programme Directors. Years back we had them in place but they fell away for whatever reason, and we have lobbied hard to get them back. MSc is such a big cohort, and this means we can break it up to smaller groups and running degree specific events, as well as having more contact with students

TIM: That's my number one worry: Don't let them be isolated and suffer the workload alone. Being apart from campus and other students while taking on a huge workload can have great effects on mental health too.

BF: That is a great concern of ours too. From my understanding the majority of students will be here. We have to offer them something to do, but given the huge restrictions on rooms it's a matter of trying to facilitate some contact that is workable and safe. Things like new piazza forums for students on computing issues is one way we are hoping for students to connect that bit more. But the workload is high - it is by design very high. The MSc for one year is compact, but spreading out over multiple years the main issues is fees

Meeting adjourned.