

MSc Staff Student Liaison Committee Meeting

11am-12:30pm, Tuesday 25th May 2021

Microsoft Teams

Present: P. Stevens (MSc Year Organiser), L. Seal (MSc Administrator), R. Finlayson (MSc Teaching Secretary), V. Kailinskas (MSc Rep), C. Ovesik (MSc Rep), R. Verweij (MSc Rep), A. Kocsis (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.

2. Comments on MSc Courses

[Note: All feedback from this meeting was sent to Course Organisers with the offer to comment on/respond to. Any feedback from the Course Organisers that was returned is included in the minutes]

Computation Cognitive Neuroscience

Reps: In general a good course but hard in a way that's also rewarding. I think the main thing is that it's too much work for a ten credit course. We would have two one-hour lectures a week which were very dense lectures, which I had to watch back and pause. Fundamental maths and physics and that sort of thing made them so dense. Then there's also multi-hour lab sessions every two weeks and then there were three assignments, and the programming assignments were very long – some of the longest, biggest assignments I've had this year. This was the course I had to work most for this semester. But it is very interesting and rewarding, but too much work as it is

Data Mining and Exploration

Reps: It was one of the most interesting course and relevant for me doing Data Science. One negative thing I could say is that the mid semester exam where the median and mean scores were low; maybe the questions we were asked were not exactly what was on the course and we didn't practice. Otherwise it was very interesting, especially the group projects and presentations.

Group Research Project (Biomedical AI)

No comments

Image and Vision Computing

Reps: This was really one of the best courses this semester. Not very heavy loaded in terms of materials. The group projects were interesting and the lecturer was really interested in the subject.

Individual Project in Advanced Natural Language Processing

No comments

Informatics Project Proposal

Reps: Regarding tutorials: even though in theory they could be useful, in practice because of the timing they weren't. In the first tutorial we had to talk about our motivation, but many of us hadn't spoken to our supervisors yet; they would be a lot more useful if they could be shifted/delayed by a few weeks. The CO said it was impossible because teaching period was ending but maybe have the six tutorials in the last six weeks?

PS: Because of the weird year, things were delayed and deadlines pushed, but in a normal year teaching activities shouldn't be happening beyond the end of the teaching period. The objection to six tutorials in the last six week could be that it loads student's workload late in the semester, and aim of the tutorials is generally to spread work out

Reps: The deadline for IPP was also pushed back, a full month after teaching ended, but because tutorials stayed in same place we had instances where we were told to write drafts that were due in two months. There was a lot of issues regarding supervisors too; a lot students say they only had one meeting with their supervisor, and couldn't get more/got low support from them.

PS: There needs to be a mechanism for students to report lack of contact; the problem is that supervisors are not implementing contact. Supervisors know they should be meeting, but maybe new staff haven't picked up all the details of the communication between themselves and students.

Reps: The live sessions were not very useful either. Sometimes because they were only Q and A sessions; it would be the same as answering question on Piazza. Perhaps we could use this one hour session to highlight other issues or important materials from the lectures. The ethics lectures were useful though.

Introductory Applied Machine Learning (PG2)

Reps: The neuro network lectures were too shallow, they might as well not be there. Perhaps they could be replaced with gradient boosting. It would be useful to have more tutorial questions too because they didn't always cover the whole material, and more questions would help this. There were also too many instructors; pre-recorded lectures from four different instructors; two different instructors for live sessions; and different tutors as well. It was difficult to find single person to go to with questions.

Reinforcement Learning

Reps: It's a great course but it's not ten credits – more like 20 credits. We had 2 one hour lectures every week but also compulsory readings every week. I think the COs did a good job to make us understand the material as well as possible, with tutorials every week which really helped. But all this additional material and work equates to 20 credits; to help us go into depth and not exceeding. It helped that there was lots of content online too. Ultimately the COs did a really good job.

[In response to a question about the absence of 15 credit courses amongst the Informatics curriculum, Neil Heatley offered this response when approached after the meeting]

“Various programmes in the past have had a range of course credit choices to allow maximum flexibility. Course credits reflect the amount of time a student should be committing for their studies. As time has gone by those courses are available to students outside certain programmes, it does create challenges regarding need concessions to take extra credit, however, is reflected that the course cannot simply made be made shorter, nor is needed as a 20 credit version. Over time all courses are likely to be either 10 or 20 credits only.”

The Human Factor: Working with Users

Reps: It was a fine, interesting course. It felt pretty superficial, but that was probably because this year it was two courses merged into one: visualisation and the human factor. It felt like for both of those parts, it was the first half or the most high levels points of those courses without going into detail on many things, which was a shame. But in general it was well organised and assignments were fine. This was an example of a ten credits course that feels like a ten credit course

Doing Research in Natural Language Processing

No comments

3. Comments on other courses

Internet of Things Systems, Security, and the Cloud (IoTSSC)

Reps: This year it was part of Cyber Security degree (you couldn't pick your courses without taking it), however, the course only related to Cyber Security a little bit. It was more like a very technical and machine learning course and that is why it was a nightmare for people with no programming and computer science background. They had to do a lot more work than others. The course has security in its name, but it's not very security-related. The staff were very helpful and they helped us as much as they could, but it was still not fair for those who didn't have the background. Maybe have more security-related material in future years.

RF: Most likely a course students had to pick due to limited course choices this year, but in the coming year hopefully there will be more choices so it won't be necessary to take

[Response from Course Organiser, D. Aspinall]:

"We recognise there was a problem this year in limited course choices available for the Cyber Security, Privacy and Trust MSc, caused by the temporary suspension of some courses made by the University as part of the pandemic response. This resulted in reduced choices for many students and in particular making IoTSSC compulsory for this MSc. We provided a strong level of support to help students taking this course as much as possible; we confirm that for following years we will indeed increase the number of security-related courses."

Algorithmic Game Theory and its Applications

Reps: This is a course that could be 15 credits, especially due to the length of the courseworks. They were not for a ten credits course. I like that the CO was very responsive on Piazza and would respond very quickly. Very nice he was doing tutorials as well, so it felt like we had a focal point of contact.

4. General issues about the year and specific courses

Reps: It was a very strange and weird semester and most people spoken to have low motivation, but there's also the fact that it will be over soon.

5. Comments on Computing Support

No comments

6. Comments on ITO Support

No comments

7. Any Other Business

Reps: Regarding Appleton Tower: you have to book 14 hours in advance, so your card can get access. Given it's just for post grad students and there's not that many in Edinburgh, would it not be possible to give people free access (if not now, then when we are in Level 1). Cards take four hours to get access, apparently, so the booking systems seems a bit unnecessary.

RF: Currently it's in place so we can keep track of who is there; ideally students would be able to move freely in and out of the labs and workspaces. The systems is slow and it's not instantaneous, so we have to give a realistic time frame of when access will transfer onto

cards. The ITO staff are the human element in the equation, having to give access at the bookings made for the coming day.

[Response from Neil Heatley, Head of Informatics Student Services]

“As and when governmental rules change we will review to see what changes this allows us in the operating of Appleton Tower with the hope of making as much space available as possible as flexibly as possible.”

PS: We can note that there is an appetite to make it not possible to go through this system any longer than it needs to be in place.

Reps: Next year where things are online, it is worth looking at how to motivate people to take part in tutorials. I had some tutorials where I was the only student and it was very demotivating. It's a difficult issue since some students are in different time zones, but sometimes it feels like I am taking the entire course of programme alone. Maybe worth mentioning in lectures that topics will be discussed further in tutorials, so as to entice students.

PS: I think if anyone has ideas then we would happy hear them. Many tutorials will still be online next year, but at least students will be expected to be in Edinburgh, so everyone will be in the same time zone. There was some attempt this year to give small amount of credits for attendance of synchronous events and such, but this has been considered to be a bad idea and we've been told not to do that next year. I guess the main thing is seeing if there's a way these online session can be made more useful and/or their usefulness advertised better. It's a hard problem; even live tutorials have poor attendance, so it's always an issue.

[Response from Neil Heatley, Head of Informatics Student Services]

“As all students are expected in Edinburgh, the time zone factor won't be an issue. We will encourage all students to fully engage with all elements of their courses to maximise their experience.”