

System Design Project (SDP)

Response to student feedback in 2017/18 course survey

We have taken note of the feedback from students in this course survey, and have the following comments in response:

- It is clear there is a mixed response, with some students very negative about the course and others very positive about the learning experience. This is partly due to the unusual nature of the course, where the need to work well together with your group, and to manage the workload can be difficult and sometimes stressful.
- Regarding workload, it was a specific aim in our redesign of this course that each group, by defining their own aims for the project, would be setting their own workload. We endeavoured to advise on making this realistic, but this year will be more proactive in ensuring that groups monitor their working time and make appropriate adjustments to their aims as the course progresses. We will also introduce mechanisms to provide extra support for groups that may be running into difficulties, and make sure it is clear to all groups that the plan set in the first week can be modified if necessary.
- Some issues are raised with how the course is run, mostly in terms of expectations and assessment procedures. We endeavoured to be as clear as possible about these, with all assessment methods outlined in detail (included the expected content of reports) from before the start of the course (not changed or provided late). Assessment included an equal balance between reports and demonstrations of the system, and was not just based on presentation skills but substantially on the actual achievements of the project. We are planning a change to the 'client' role to reduce the possibility of groups receiving conflicting advice. We also plan to strengthen the availability of technical advice, and the direct support for team development and management skills.
- Although we endeavoured to provide clear marking schemes and feedback (which was always significantly more extensive than just a 'bad mark') on all submitted work, we will look closely at this; in particular ensuring students have sufficient opportunity to ask for clarification before assessment points. We emphasise that we were not scaling the marks but were marking consistently with the university's marking scheme in which a mark above 70% is excellent, and with marks above 85% expected only for truly exceptional work.
- Some issues concern the technical infrastructure. We have introduced new equipment for the current year that we hope will reduce these issues, but reiterate that the experience of encountering and overcoming technical hurdles (including hardware and communication issues) is inherent to the course.
- We wish to note that it is not true in any sense that students were told they would fail if they refused to cross the strike picket line. We made the decision that the least overall disruption would result if we went ahead with two scheduled demonstration times (each worth only 5% of the final mark) despite the strike. Individual students were not required to attend; and alternative arrangements were made when an entire group did not attend.

- Finally, it is worth noting that despite the negative tone of some comments, there is nevertheless some excellent advice offered to students, such as: working steadily throughout the semester, but with clear limits; keeping good communication with your team and addressing team-related problems early; taking report-writing seriously; being aware that this is unlike any course you have taken previously...

Barbara Webb, September 2018