

**Student-Staff Forum**  
**Monday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021**  
**13:00 – 14:00**  
**Remote via MS Teams**

**Presenters:** Michele Dougherty (MD), Carl Paterson (CP), Ingo Mueller-Wodarg (IMW), Richard Thompson (RT) Yasmin Andrew (YA)

MD welcomed all and introduced the panel.

CP provided an update on teaching and learning for the next academic year. The department would like to have more in-person teaching next year with the priority being given to all laboratory and computing sessions. Seminars and tutorials are also likely to take place in person. CP said that due to the constraints of the timetable we need to plan for what is likely to be in place rather than what we hope to be in place. Lectures will be a blended mix of pre-recorded and in-person sessions. These plans are for Term 1 only with the hope that restrictions will be relaxed in time for Term 2. We will be planning with the expectation that there will be social distancing requirements in place and if they are relaxed, we can be flexible in allowing more students on campus fairly quickly.

Students were invited to submit questions before the meeting, and these have been answered below:

- 1. Next year's lectures are online, how many other activities will be offline? If it's like 3-5 hours a week, the cost to fly and live in London is unjustifiable.**

CP covered this in the overview, but lectures will have online recordings and every module will have at least a one-hour in-person session every week. The only restriction on these extra sessions is that they are not for extra material but to support existing learning. If social distancing is in place, we will make sure that any in-person sessions are accessible for those not attending in person. There will likely be more than three to five in-person contact hours a week.

- 2. Why shouldn't we plan for full reopening (including lectures) and adjust if restrictions come in by law? There shouldn't be restrictions on top of Government laws.**

CP said that we need to plan for what we think is likely and for what we can deliver. It is not possible to move from in-person to remote lectures so quickly, we must plan for the lecture courses to be deliverable and to provide a good education given the circumstances. RT confirmed that whilst the Government is encouraging us to plan for as many in-person activities as possible it also wants us to avoid 'super-spreader' events that might risk infection, core lectures fall into this category.

- 3. I would have preferred this past year (if the lecturers would like to) to have synchronous streamed lectures - is this not possible? Found concentration hard.**

CP understands the issue and concern, some of the Theory lecture courses did offer some synchronous events as did the Heads of Years. The difficulty lies with timetabling. If we are trying to run seminars and laboratory sessions in person then these will take up more space in the timetable with social distancing in place which means, there are fewer timeslots where

all students are available. Having asynchronous lectures meant that we were able to schedule seminars and laboratory sessions for all.

- 4. How can we improve on our exams when we don't have access to the solutions? Do we get our exam paper back with markings telling which questions we got wrong?**

CP confirmed that access to three year's worth of solutions is available. An exercise where students get to go through the Mechanics and Relativity exam with Tutors is also in place in Year 1.

- 5. Will in-person lectures be run for courses that are taken by a relatively small number of people?**

CP confirmed that currently, the plan is to not do this so in-person lectures can be shared across all courses. If we run in-person lectures for smaller lecture courses, it would take up more lecture theatre space and so some courses wouldn't be able to have in-person lectures at all.

Questions raised during the meeting:

- 6. Will the College still have a social distancing requirement even if there is no legal requirement? If not, how long would it take to pivot to full in-person lectures? What timeframe is the estimate? If, as planned, in late July, the government removes social distancing, will the two to three months be enough to revert to in-person lectures?**

CP informed that planning for October teaching is already underway and fully in-person lectures are not something we can do here. Lecturers will give in-person sessions and it will up to them to use as they see fit.

- 7. Given the difficulty of some of this year's open-book exams, what will be done to ensure that the resit/deferral exams are fair as these exams don't usually get scaled?**

CP confirmed that resit/deferral exams do not get scaled. They are written to be in the same format as the main exams and we do not yet know if there will be more scaling than last year. We will need to wait until the Exam Board has taken place before deciding on what has happened and if changes need to happen.

- 8. Why did you have to change the exam structure/questions? Last year during COVID, we had the same exam papers as if they weren't open book with extra time and from the histograms I've seen, the results weren't biased very much. I don't see why it was crucial to change the examinations.**

CP confirmed that last year the exam-style was not changed because the timescale in which we had to move to timed remote assessment was short and it would have affected student's exam preparation. The College guidance was also that we do not change the style last year. This year we knew in advance that assessments would be remote, and the guidance was to write for an open-book exam. During the Exam Board last year, we had to scale more exams downward than we would have done in a normal year, which is not desirable.

- 9. Will there be a reduction in tuition fees as a result of the loss of quality of teaching for this academic year?**

CP and MD both confirmed that the learning aims were met so there would be no reduction in fees. RT informed that the College view is that at every stage we have done as much as we can as has been allowed under the Government restrictions. The learning aims have been considered in everything that has been done and we have satisfied these the best way we can in light of the Government restrictions, and it would, therefore, not be appropriate to reduce the fees.

**10. If there is a maximum capacity for lecture theatres, who can and cannot attend? Will it be on a first-come, first-served basis?**

CP confirmed that there are maximum capacities and College are working out what these will be based on the level of ventilation in the room. Broadly speaking, we are expecting our lecture theatres to be at half capacity. This does mean that not all students will be able to attend in-person sessions at the same time and we are looking at allocating the sessions on a ticketed basis, so all students get a fair opportunity to attend. RT informed all that capacity restrictions on rooms will be removed and the Safety Team are currently determining reasonable room capacities taking entrances and exits into account.

**11. How is the Department screening for collusion and cheating this year?**

When there is a suspicion of collusion during marking these are passed directly to the Academic Integrity Officer for investigation. There is also the potential for students to be invited to a viva to determine whether the work is there's.

**12. Considering the 'rigorous vetting process' how did the Light and Matter exam happen and why was there a problem sheet question in the Comprehensive exam?**

CP said that while several students thought the calibration for the Light and Matter exam was wrong, we cannot make this judgement before the Exam Board. Both the Examiners and External Examiners did not think there was an issue and thought that it was a fair assessment of student capabilities. We, therefore, need to wait for the Exam Board before any action is taken. The Examiners carefully looked at the Comprehensive exam to see if any action needs to be taken to address the question that was on Blackboard with the solution from a year ago. This is currently being investigated.

**13. Health-wise, due to this year being almost entirely online, I felt like there was a constant pressure to spend all my time doing university work (much more than other years) with endless emails all day, lectures, and coursework to complete. Are there going to be any measures to allow students to disconnect from university outside of 'workable' hours?**

CP hopes so and agreed that this last year has been too much for most people, students, and staff alike. The extra in-person sessions will be there to support lecture courses, but we need to be mindful that they are not used to add extra content. We are also looking at ways to reduce the number of assessments in second and third year laboratories. YA asked for students to send in their ideas on how the Department can help them to disconnect. RT said that College is very aware that the student experience has been very affected this year and they are working with the Union to make sure aspects of the experience are restored as much as possible. One student suggested the solution to avoid overworking is in-person lectures.

**14. Why shouldn't we get feedback on the material (e.g. vector calculus, tensor notations, etc.) that has nothing to do with Year 1 Term 1 material? Is it essentially a funding or logistics problem that stems from central College? Or that it would considerably lengthen the marking process?**

Staff asked for the student who raised this question to provide clarity on what they meant, and we would then come back to answer.

**15. Preparation for open-book exams this year has also been hard as no relevant resources were provided – most mock papers were simply copied from past exam questions and are not indicative of the new open-book style at all.**

Mock papers were provided to give students an indication of the exam structure, Lecturer's approached this in different ways. For his lecture course, CP deliberately used questions from the previous year and made modifications to these to highlight what would be different in an open-book format and that certain questions were effective for assessing student learning.

**16. Will there be vaccination requirements for attending in-person events and will this be a College-wide policy?**

RT has not heard anything yet, but it has been confirmed that for students coming from abroad, and who have had one vaccination, they will be able to get their second in the UK either of the same vaccine or the most similar alternative should the first dose vaccine they received not be available in the UK.

**17. I think open-book exams are much more useful than previous exams because it is more challenging, so we learn more (instead of reciting definitions). I heard that some lecturers agree that exams should always be open-book, COVID or not. Is this possible?**

CP agreed that we could keep the positive aspects of open-book exams and we are looking at different ways to consider doing this e.g. allowing students to take in a sheet of notes to the exam.

**18. How is synchronous timetabling difficult considering it is something that would normally be carried out in the case of no COVID?**

CP said it is more difficult if laboratories, seminars and tutorials are in-person then these take up quite a bit of time in the timetable, even if they are not taking up lecture theatre space they reduce the number of timeslots where all students are available to schedule lectures.

**19. Are these extra session on top of normal hours or replacing lecture time?**

CP said we need to be careful to not add to the workload for students but that the Department wants the lecturers to have the choice on how to use the sessions most appropriately. They could replace an online lecture with an in-person one provided that were not all students can attend in person the recorded element is good enough so students do not miss out, or they could use the time for problem classes such as is done during Rapid Feedback sessions. The extra sessions should supplement the existing learning and not add to the workload.

**20. What more in-person activities would you be able to offer if social distancing is relaxed? I assume this doesn't mean lectures could be made in-person again.**

The things we could do immediately is to open ticketed sessions to all, this gives more flexibility for lecturers to replace online recorded lectures with an in-person lecture knowing that all students could attend.

**21. If lectures next year are in-person, will physical attendance be optional?**

We had this before the pandemic and recorded in-person lectures. CP confirmed that we would not force students to attend lectures in person.

**22. Have there been contingencies put in place in case something like Group Theory (or an in-person equivalent) happens again?**

CP confirmed that the late uploading and release of lectures should not happen again as we have recordings for most lectures now.

**23. Something that I really missed this year was student-staff contact time. I always found it a very important source of learning, not just the content but also the approach of a researcher. Unfortunately, the virtual contact events were not good enough.**

MD agrees with this being the most important thing we have all missed out on this year. CP hopes that having more in-person sessions next year will provide the opportunity for students and staff to discuss content more informally.

**24. Would remote lectures look the same as this year or would more be recorded in the lecture theatres?**

CP said this would depend on the quality of recordings from this year and doesn't want to ask staff to re-record as their time could be better spent supplementing material and confirmed it will be a mix of using recordings or re-recording.

- 25. During this summer, are students and staff allowed to meet in person (observing social distancing etc.) for an undergraduate research project which is non-lab based?**

CP confirmed that this can happen so long as College and Government guidelines are followed.

- 26. Why is the scaling policy linear? It appears biased against students who have achieved firsts, and it would be fairer to employ Gaussian scaling with appropriate mean and SD. It gives the impression that the College is attempting to simply get the 'correct' number of passes, fails and firsts, rather than accurately reflecting the hard work and skill of a given cohort.**

CP said the scaling document provides clarity on the decision-making process and what the mechanism is. RT informed all that College does not set out how we should scale or how we should achieve the safety net requirement. There was a discussion in the Department when scaling was first introduced and considered many ways of scaling. It was decided that a linear scaling approach was the most appropriate way to scale as it distorts results less than other means of scaling. Other universities and departments in the Faculty use similar scaling mechanisms.

- 27. Will Research Frontiers be ticketed, and how regularly will it be organised next year? It is a very valuable place to spark inspirations.**

YA confirm that Research Frontiers will be running throughout Terms 1 and 2 and Physics in Industry talks will take place on alternate weeks. The Lunchtime Lectures will continue online so we can get people from all over the world to give a guest lecture. YA would like to have ticketed events for Research Frontiers and Physics in Industry but it might need to be a mixture of live lectures and online broadcasts so all can attend. YA asked students to send her their ideas on what work best for Research Frontiers for the next academic year.

**Action:** YA to create a Student-Staff Forum Team to post all questions and answers, including those that weren't covered in the meeting due to time constraints.