

Student Experience Forum
Wednesday 7th June 2023
12:00 – 13:30
Blackett Lecture Theatre 1

Panel Members:

Name	Position
Prof Carlo Contaldi (CC)	Deputy Head of Department, Education
Prof Carl Paterson (CP)	Director of Undergraduate Studies
Derryck Stewart (DS)	Undergraduate Education Manager
Dr Derek Lee (DL)	Deputy Senior Tutor
Dr Sebastien Guenneau (SG)	Senior Tutor
Dr Yasmin Andrew (YA)	Student Liaison Officer
Prof Stuart Mangles (SM)	Head of Year 1
Dr Simon Bland (SB)	Head of Year 2
Prof Jing Zhang	Head of Years 3 & 4

CC informed all that he has taken on a new role as the Deputy Head of Department for Education. Work will be done to address the low NSS score and over the summer to address the more acute problems of workload, lab, and marking & feedback. The longer-term issues will be addressed from October.

Q. Can you take 4th year options in 3rd year, or 3rd year options in 4th year?

A. Yes, JZ provided rules around this at the [Electives Talk](#). Students can take one Year 4 option in Year 3, and if you do this then you can take a Year 3 option in Year 4.

Q. Would it be possible to have revision lectures/revision sheets for every course?

A. We know there is some difference between courses, we can talk to the Lecturers about this. We did remove revision lectures from Term 3 to spread the exams out more and to avoid exams being compressed towards the end of the term. If there is a strong opinion for reintroducing, we can rethink it. Lecturers should be running exam office hours in term 3.

Q. Can there be more UROPs in the department?

A. The department gets a set number of College bursaries each year, it has already been requested that this number be increased for next year. The Department funding has increased from two UROPS per group to three per group this year. The Department does not offer UROPs that are not funded as they do not believe it is fair to only offer the opportunity to those who can afford it. YA asked students to contact her if they have ideas on how to streamline or improve staff involvement. CC noted that there has been a large shift in the number of UROPS available with 83 taking place last year. If students are interested in doing a UROP then they can contact staff directly to discuss the possibilities of doing one.

Q. Can the teaching quality for QI be improved?

A. YA: asked if the student who left the question could get in touch with more details, so any issues could be addressed.

Q. Could the teaching quality of the Concepts in Device Physics module be improved? There were also too few problem sheets, only 5 out of the 8 promised were released.

A. JZ said that this issue was raised at one of the regular mini-SSC meetings with the Year Reps and JZ spoke with the lecturer. When there are issues with teaching, it was asked that students provide specific information about the issues and complete the mid-term and Module Evaluation Questionnaires which as much detail as possible. Students can also speak with their Year Reps or Head of Year so real-time feedback can be implemented.

Q. Would it be possible to get the microwaves cleaned every now and then?

A. The microwaves were provided to students on the understanding that they will keep them clean, and this has not happened. There is a sign above the microwave that explains students are responsible for keeping the microwaves clean, cleaning materials are provided and more can be obtained from the Student Education Office.

JZ: highlighted that this had been discussed in one of the SSC meetings this year.

It was suggested that more communication around Common Room and microwave etiquette is needed. Staff will work with the Student Reps on how to best implement a workable process.

Q. Can we have quiet/silent study spaces in Blackett?

A. YA: A silent study room exists on Level 1.

Q. Would it be possible to get more study spaces in Blackett?

A. CC: The DHoD- infrastructure is currently working on identifying spaces for Physics and continuing to improve existing study spaces.

Q. Could we have more social spaces like in Chemistry with facilities to heat up lunch etc.?

A. There is minimal space available in Blackett, but the Deputy Head of Department for Infrastructure is looking into space. They have discovered that there is space in the Chemistry Building, including quiet space, which is available or all students to use. YA emails students each year with a list of study spaces across campus that students can use. It was noted that signs are needed for the Level 1 Silent Study area to make it clear it is for silent study.

Q. Can there be standardised formatting for exams to make them more accessible? Different formatting styles make it easy to miss questions or hints.

A. There is a standard template that is used for exams. If this has been causing a problem, we can look at the exams for this year.

Q. Why is there a 3-week delay between releasing the problem sheet and the answers? Could answers be released at the same time as the questions to allow flexibility on how these are used for non-assessed sheets? When there are no solutions, students feel strongly discouraged from even trying.

A. The problem sheets are a tool to help students study. For the modules without Rapid Feedback sessions, the answers are usually released a week after the release of the problem sheet. For those that do have Rapid Feedback sessions, there are two formats these have been taking. One is a classwork format where students work through the problem sheets during the session, the answers are released after the session. The older format of Rapid Feedback is that students hand in the problem sheets for marking, these are then gone through at the sessions which accounts for the three-week delay. The classwork format was introduced this year as a pilot, the students who attended overwhelmingly preferred it. The purpose of rapid feedback sessions is to allow students to go through the questions by themselves with support during the session. Answers are not released immediately to help students prepare for exams where solutions are not available. It is important that students learn how to be comfortable working through a problem without a solution so they can prepare for exam situations. Some lecturers are now providing numerical answers on the problem sheets. It was agreed by all that the timely release of the answers is important.

Q. Can we have a different set of answers other than 2021 as they are open-book exams and so much less relevant to us? Could we have the 2022 exam answers instead? Why could numerical answers to exams not be provided again?

A. The 2021 exam solutions will be changed and will go to the Teaching Committee this afternoon. CP suggested that the 2022 solutions be released as well as the 2021 solutions. It was noted numerical answers to exams were previously done and the Department can discuss reintroducing this.

Q. Three sets of solutions are released but, in some cases, two out of three are not relevant due to content changes. Could this be addressed?

A. The NPP and SS modules released a mock paper along with a list of previous papers that are relevant to the modules to account for the changes. If lecturers are not clearly stating the changes, then students should speak to them or their Head of Year.

Q. Quality check past paper solutions? Phrases like “students are given enough information to calculate this”, and “award marks for a good sketch” aren’t very helpful.

A. It was noted that exams are summative, and the solutions are built for a specific purpose, to enable people to mark the exam. If this is too prescriptive in the answer, then there is less freedom to award marks. CC will be looking at the length of exams for the time allotted over the next year.

Q. Why are the GR and QFT exams always so close to each other?

A. SPDM informed all that exam timetabling has a lot of constraints and there is a College-wide exam timetabling policy which must be met. QFT is also a module on the MSc QFFF programme so needs to fit in with their exam as well.

Q. Why is there a cap on the new ML module? Given that it won't be offered to Year 4 students in 2024-25, fewer current 2nd year students can take it.

A. There is a cap on the module to allow those delivering it a chance to deliver a good course. The Department is trying to make it fair for all students, if this course had been running for a while as a Year 3 course, then the Year 4 students could have bid for it in their third year. As it is a new course, the Department wants to allow Year 4 students the chance to take it. All students will be treated equally by the options algorithm so they will all have a fair chance at being assigned to the module. The FHEQ 7 version is only being introduced to allow the Year 4 students a chance to do the module.

It was asked if more courses in this area will be introduced. CP said that if the pilot goes well, then we would expect to increase the number of places on the module. There are no immediate plans to introduce additional courses, but the Department will look into this and would need to consider all the electives being offered if any new modules are introduced as something

Q. I would like to access materials from the Maths Department. Is that possible?

A. This is only possible if a student is taking a module for degree credit.

Q. For modules that upload their lecture notes at the start of the term, could any modifications to the PDF file be done specifically in red? Some students print out the notes.

A. This is a good idea, and the request can be passed on to the lecturers.

Q. Can every module have an online question-asking forum (Ed Discussion)? It is useful to see what other people have asked and helps us revise before exams.

Do you intend to continue using this? What is the standard way to use this?

A. CC noted that staff need to figure out how to use this better as there was a lack of communication to staff when this was introduced. It won't be enforced on staff to use it as the Department would like to leave some freedom for staff to use it as best for their module.

Q. How can students get involved with research groups? Teaching and research are very separate at the moment.

A. When students start to work on their BSc and MSci projects they do get closer to research. Students can also do UROP projects.

Q. How can someone interested in SPAT and Astro balance the workload? It feels like all the modules will be in the second term.

A. There will always be clashes like this, the Department has tried to balance the load already. Once students are allocated to their electives if they are worried about the workload then they can email DS and discuss it with him.

Q. What changes will be made following the low NSS ratings from previous years?

A. summary of changes will be communicated at the beginning of the next academic year, this is being worked on now.

Q. How much work are we expected to do for Research Interfaces each week?

A. This information is in the module specification. For a 5 ECTS module, there are 125 hours in total, which works out to about 8 hours a week. If students find they are needing to go over this, they should get in touch.

Q. I saw someone say that people are complaining too much about the workload. I think the workload could be decreased slightly, but the main point is the atmosphere of huge stress and competition that surrounds me in the department, especially during exam season. Will the department take any action addressing the competitive atmosphere? E.g., promoting available mental health services.

A. SPDM said we have been made aware of this issue of competition over the last few years and would like to address this. The Department is looking into how to do this.

Mental health support is regularly advertised to students and staff can look at the communication for this. The Faculty and College are expanding its mental health teams.

Q. What is the department's decision on the timetable formatting for future second years?

A. SB has been polling the students on this topic. Year 1 and 2 students are in favour of moving Computing into Term 3 and the electives into Terms 1 and 2. This will be discussed at today's Teaching Committee meeting for final approval.

Q. There aren't many theoretical optional modules in Year 2 (either Environmental Physics or SSP) and learning advanced classical physics feels like it is too late.

A. Students on the theoretical physics degree programmes will do Maths Methods as one of their electives. From a workload perspective, Year 2 is considered to have the highest workload so staff would not want to bring content from ACP into Year 2.

Q. I wish that staff wouldn't take the students' complaints about workload too seriously. Many students want to learn more but complaining voices are always the loudest.

A. YA asked any student who feels this way to get in touch with her so they can discuss how to enrich their educational experience.