

Consultative Committee for Mathematics in the Natural Sciences

*DRAFT Minutes of a meeting held on
Tuesday 15th November 2011 at 1.15 p.m.,
in Meeting Room 11, Centre for Mathematical Sciences, Clarkson Road*

Present: Dr Ben Allanach, Dr Sue Colwell (Convenor), Prof. Steve Gull, Dr Harvey Reall, Dr Mark Spivack, Mr Calum Kennedy-Dietrich, Miss Hannah Williams, Miss Elizabeth Matthews.
Apologies: Dr Robert Best

1. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising.

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

2. Part IA, A course: Mr Kennedy-Dietrich reported

Lecture Course: Prof Shellard.

The lecturer is audible and legible, and the attendance is good, although it does dip on Saturdays. The students have pointed out that some of them have not done any maths seriously for a while, even those who have not taken gap years have often done maths modules early, and so they would like a basic sheet of formulae they are expected to know. They feel that the lecturer spends too much time at the beginning of a lecture revising the previous lecture, which makes the new material seem rushed. The lecture notes which are of the fill in the gap kind, and have been handed out in sections, are thought to be good. There have been some anomalies in the pace of the course, for example the section on complex numbers was taken too fast, and students would appreciate a summary sheet on line, possibly on an initial reading list. The examples sheets are good, they are thought to be well structured and to contain a good mix of questions with some covering the basic concepts, and some dealing with more complex ideas.

3. Part IA, B course: Miss Williams reported.

Lecture Course: Dr Challinor.

The lecturer is audible and legible, but the pace of the lectures is felt to be uneven. Some students think he goes too fast all the way through, but some think he goes too fast through unfamiliar material, such as the cross product, and too slowly through familiar material. The lecture room doesn't seem big enough, and usually seems full, although the seating is not always used efficiently. There is a problem with visibility for students sitting at the far end. Some students come in very late to lectures, and walk across in front of the lecturer and people talk in lectures which is very distracting. Some students do not like the format of the lecture notes which have gaps for filling in details of examples, but no space for e.g adding notes in the margins. This is felt to be necessary as sometimes the lecturer writes with a pen, and what he writes is slightly different from the printed notes so students want to annotate them. The examples sheets are thought to be good.

There was a request for a break in the middle of lectures as students felt it hard to concentrate for the full time without a pause. There was also a request for some kind of technological instant feedback system so that the students could tell the lecturer when they didn't understand him. Some of the senior members of the committee commented that instant feedback was rather dangerous, as it could lead to unconsidered responses. The Convenor reminded the students about the nst@maths.cam.ac.uk address which could be used to submit feedback which would be anonymized before it was passed on to the lecturer. The student representatives asked that this be better publicised, perhaps by the lecturer putting up a slide at the beginning of a lecture.

4. Part IB course: Miss Matthews reported.

Lecture course: Dr Wingate

The lecturer is very clear and the pace is good. In general his writing is legible, but on one occasion he didn't bring overheads, and the students found it confusing. There were not enough examples done in the lectures, and so people didn't know how to apply the rules to solve the problems on the examples sheets. The first examples class has now taken place, and this has improved the situation. The contents of the handouts are good, but they are handed out in chapters, each of which has an identical cover page, and students often bring the wrong one to lectures. The students ask that the different sections at least have numbers on the front, and preferably distinguishable titles. The examples sheets are good, but there are felt to be a few questions where the algebra is too heavy. The attendance is steady with the lecture room being about three quarters full. The lecturer has said that students can ask quick questions or point out typos, but some people are asking deeper questions which disrupts the class. The students would like it to be made clear that students with such questions should e-mail the lecturer or approach him after the lecture.

6. Any other business.

Both the IA and IB representatives confirmed that most people do not use books very much, preferring to rely on the on-line resources, although the book by Riley, Hobson and Bence was found useful by those who had consulted it. In response to a question as to whether lecturers should continue to circulate paper copies of handouts and examples sheets given everything is on line, the student representatives said they still needed hard copies to work with; they feel that bringing laptops to lectures and following and annotating the notes on them is not practical for maths. They pointed out that they have to pay for their own printing, and the costs to them would be significant if they had to download and print everything themselves.

Professor Gull reiterated his amazement that the attendance at maths lectures is not monitored, as it is for Physics.