

Biannual meeting of the Directors of Studies in Mathematics

MINUTES

Date and time: Tuesday 10th May, 11 am

Venue: Room MR5, Centre for Mathematical Sciences

Present: Nathanael Berestycki (DoS Convenor, King's)

Irena Borzym (St Catharine's), Alexandre Bouayad (St John's), Thomas Körner (Trinity Hall), Christopher Brookes (Corpus Christi), Stephen Cowley (Emmanuel), Sophia Demoulini (Downing), Jonathan Evans (Gonville & Caius), Anita Faul (Selwyn), Thomas Forster (Clare Hall and St Edmund's), Julia Goedecke (Newnham), Julia Gog (Queens'), Julius Ross (Sidney Sussex), Anastasia Kisil (Corpus Christi), John Lister (Trinity), Orsola Rath Spivack (Lucy Cavendish), Stephen Siklos (Jesus), Mike Tehranchi (Trinity), Christopher Tout (Churchill), Anthony Ashton (Homerton), Clive Wells (Hughes Hall), András Zsák (Peterhouse), Matthew Wingate (Fitzwilliam & CATAM), Stergios Antonakoudis (Emmanuel), Rachel Camina (Fitzwilliam), Nilanjana Datta (Pembroke), Julian Gilbey (Jesus), Peter O'Donnell (St Edmund's), Gareth Taylor (Corpus), Oscar Randal-Williams (Kings), Ross Lawther (Girton).

1. Apologies

Maciej Dunajski (Clare), Richard Weber (Queens), Simon Wadsley (Homerton), Paul Smith (Murray Edwards), Stuart Martin (Magdalene), Jack Button (Selwyn), Chris Warner (Robinson).

2. Minutes of the previous meeting on 26th February 2016

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved with no outstanding matters arising.

3. Admission matters:

a) STEP Correspondence: the Course Awakens

Dr Siklos informed us that the DfE would extend the funding of the current STEP course for a further 5 months. In addition the colleges have very recently agreed to fund the new version of the STEP course which was discussed at the previous DoS meeting on 26 February 2016. As consequence of the new agreement, there will be no STEP Easter course next year, which will be replaced by a correspondence course starting in July.

Dr Goedecke asked who is allowed on the course. Dr Siklos responded that the correspondence course has several phases, the first one of which is completely open access. Student support is then ramped up when details of a conditional offer is known. The intention is then to give the most intensive support to students according roughly to the same selection criteria as was used for the Easter School. In total the aim is to support up to 250 students in this manner, which is roughly the same number as that of offer-holders from non-selective state schools. Dr Siklos further confirmed that NRICH is taking over the running of the course and plans to launch this at the beginning of July. Dr Borzym, concerned that people are already going online to find out about the course, requested that a link to the course be added to the DAMTP website, to which Dr Rath Spivack replied that there is general information available at the moment and a link will only be visible once the course is

confirmed and the start date is known. [For the record, this is on the Faculty Admissions pages where it belongs, not the DAMTP website as Dr Borzym asked.]

The DoS Convenor (Prof. Berestycki) expressed relief that funding has been secured and gave thanks on behalf of the committee to Dr Siklos, all the colleagues in NRICH and to Julia Hawkins in particular for her hard work. The DoS Convenor asked if the course is likely to continue after next year. Dr Siklos expressed cautious optimism.

b) MUAC Admissions Guidance document

Dr Gog reported on changes to the new document following discussion on the wording of some of the terms at the last meeting. Dr Gog asked if the revised document could now be approved to be publicly available online and used elsewhere. This new version was widely seen as addressing most concerns discussed at the February meeting. Prof. Lister made further suggestions on wording changes to ensure emphasis is as intended.

The DoS convenor proposed to approve the document and ask Dr. Gog to adjust wording as she sees fit to reflect these minor points. The committee approved the document and Dr. Gog agreed to make these small changes.

c) Maths summer and winter pool procedure

Dr. Gog said there are no major changes to the summer and winter pool procedures, except for some minor wording and formatting, and using a numbered list of applicants in the winter poolside meeting to speed up the picking rounds.

The DoS Convenor proposed approval of the documents and approval was agreed by the committee.

d) MUAC committee.

The DoS committee was asked to nominate a member to sit on MUAC to replace Dr Martin whose term ends in September. The DoS Convenor asked for a volunteer. Dr Ross volunteered for the position and was proposed and duly accepted by the DoS committee.

4. Tripos matters:

a) Teaching and Curriculum Committee Report

Prof. Lister outlined the course changes as approved by the Faculty Board, in particular the change to the material covered in Cosmology (reverting to popular pre-2012 subjects that had been removed since), and a new D course on Analysis of Functions in 'Pure+stats'.

There is enthusiasm for the new Quantum Information Theory course but there are still ongoing discussions regarding e.g. the need to find qualified supervisors.

Prof. Lister added that answers to the 2011 IA tripos exams had been made public. DoSes should send him an email if they wish to give feedback.

Dr Gilbey asked whether the prerequisite of Probability and Measure and Linear Analysis means that the audience for the new course on Analysis of Functions would be small. Prof. Lister replied that there were between 40 to 50 students who did both courses last year (based on their answering exam questions at the end of the year and end of lecture questionnaires), so there should be a reasonable audience. Dr Zsák asked if Linear Analysis will be taught in Michaelmas instead of Lent term as is sometimes the case now, to which Prof Lister replied that this is indeed the intention.

b) Supervisor Support

Dr Goedecke gave a lengthy summary of the main problem affecting the availability and quality of Supervisors. One of her proposed changes (as shown in the agenda attachment Item6_SupervisorSupportv3-1.pdf) is to completely re-vamp the training course to be more practically useful.

Dr Goedecke wants to ensure that the course covers both practical aspects specific to supervisions as well as general advice and ideas about teaching. Once the course is as useful as we can make it, we should aim to make sure that all new supervisors (and in fact, all new PhD students) attend the course. Dr Goedecke continued by saying that the 'Guide to Supervision' booklet is not being read by all new supervisors, and proposed that this too needs to be slightly revised and a short summary of main points added to the front. Prof Lister said that most complaints regarding supervision are to do with practical aspects such as supervisors writing out long solutions to every question rather than adjusting to the students' specific needs, or not having marked supervision work. He added that it would be a good idea if supervisors could sit in on other supervisions to see common practice of these practical aspects.

Regarding ongoing support of also more experienced supervisors, it was to have a regular informal teaching lunches to share best practice and ideas. This received support from the DoSes.

There was a discussion about the most practical way to ensure that positive and constructive feedback (both positive and negative) reaches supervisors, and it was initially suggested by Dr. Goedecke and Dr. Gog that Faculty could play a role in gathering this information. However, Prof. Lister pointed out that because responsibility for supervisions ultimately lies with colleges rather than Faculty it would be better for colleges to be responsible for collecting this information and sending it to supervisors. This poses a number of practical challenges as Part II supervisions are organised by circuses which are not even always the same for Pure and Applied. Dr Cowley suggested that if Trinity already has the software this could be used by other colleges? Dr Faul suggested that Camsis could be an alternative.

Dr Gog had a concern that if individual colleges run feedback systems, then supervisors can identify the students involved, so DoS are left either not passing on the feedback very directly, or doing so after the academic year. Simply running Queens' current system across multiple college does not resolve things either as the admin increases proportionately as written comments need to be collated and managed by hand to some extent.

Finally Dr Borzym pointed out that there may be a problem with students being reluctant to fill in a feedback form and preferring to tell their DoS privately.

Allocation of supervisors is a further issue as some specialised Part II courses do not have enough. Partly it was felt that this is because too much is expected of supervisors. Dr Gilbey mentioned that past exam question model answers are now scanned and kept by the Undergraduate Office who can email them to supervisors, subject to them completing a form confirming they will not be shown to students under any circumstances. Dr Gilbey said that it was suggested by Amy Dittrich in the Undergraduate Office that perhaps the model solutions could be on Moodle with a high level password so that they are available to approved supervisors. This was seen as a good idea to investigate and it has already been noted by the Undergraduate Office to look into at a suitable time.

The DoS Convenor concluded that this is a big problem and that the DoS need to think of the best way to streamline supervision arrangements and to support supervisors.

The DoS Convenor proposed a working party be set up to look into the issue of supervisions, to formulate recommendations and implement them. His proposal was seconded by Dr Cowley and agreed by the committee. He further suggested Dr Goedecke be involved, and requested that all DoSes who would like to be involved should email him directly.

c) CATAM plagiarism policy

Dr Wingate brought to the attention of the DoS the change in policy regarding plagiarism following a meeting held last summer. The summary is that the new policy is hoped to be a more effective deterrent than the previous one. In particular, the Computational Projects are regarded as a single piece of work. If, on balance of probabilities, it has been established that unfair means have been used for the Computational Projects, a likely outcome is that a mark of 0 will be recorded for the Computational Projects in their entirety.

The DoS unanimously declared their support for this new policy, expressing the hope that the University will stand behind the examiners when cases arise in the future.

d) Director of Studies meeting Rota

Dr Siklos informed the committee that the next DoS Convenor in line should be from Murray Edwards. However Dr Paul Smith is leaving and there is nobody else in place to replace him at the moment. The DoS Convenor, looking at the rota, said that the next in line DoS Conveyor after Murray Edwards would come from Sidney Sussex.

Dr Ross (Sidney Sussex) has agreed to take over as DoS Convenor for 2016-17, swapping duties with Murray Edwards who will take over for 2017-18. The DoS convenor expressed his gratitude to Dr. Ross for his willingness to take on the role earlier than expected.

5. Any Other Business

Dr Cowley raised the issue of class lists being made unavailable to Director of Studies in full. The general board has signed a report that needs to go to council for discussion and vote. If the vote goes against the current system, DoS may only be given the exam results of their own students, depriving them of context and of a fundamental tool in day to day work. The DoS recorded their grave concerns as to these restrictions coming into place.

The DoS Convenor announced that Athena Swan as a group is keen to get information on students who have dropped out of the course, in which year, what happened, and why. He asked the DoS that if they have any knowledge of any students who dropped out in the past five years, to email him with some information. Dr Rath Spivack said she has a list of students who dropped out in the last five years and that the corresponding DoS will receive an email soon.

Finally, the DoS Convenor reminded the committee that he is seeking volunteers to join the working party to work on the Supervision support project.