

Consultative Committee for Mathematics in the Natural Sciences

*DRAFT Minutes of a meeting held on
Wednesday November 17th 2010 at 1.15 p.m.,
in Meeting Room 1, Centre for Mathematical Sciences, Clarkson Road*

Present: Dr Ben Allanach, Dr Sue Colwell (Convenor), Prof Steve Gull, Miss Sara Dalton, Miss Olivia Skilbeck, Mr Ethan Shapera.

Apologies: Dr Robert Best, Dr Harvey Reall, Dr Mark Spivack.

1. Minutes of previous meeting and matters arising.

The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed.

2. Part IA, A course: Miss Dalton reported.

Lecture Course: Professor Peake.

Miss Dalton had circulated a questionnaire, and had received fifty five responses. Her summary of the results of the questionnaire is attached.

The quality of the teaching is thought to be very good with more than a fifth of the class rating it as excellent. The lecturer is audible, and legible, and the students appreciate the fact that he uses two OHPs. He gives out handouts which are complete apart from some gaps in the examples (the complete handouts are available on CamTools), and the students rated these as good with 11 respondents rating them excellent. The majority think the pace is comfortable, although some think it is a bit fast for those with only one A level, and the students think that there is a good atmosphere in lectures (indeed one student rated it as “exciting”). The lecture room is about half full, and although the attendance declined a bit after the first few weeks, it is now stable with only a small dip on Saturdays. Most students turn up on time, but there is a significant group who come in very late (at about 9.30) presumably after some other activity. Professor Gull repeated his previous comment that it was standard practice in Physics for a prep room assistant to count the class as they entered the lecture theatre.

The students found the Workbook good preparation for the course, and they think the examples sheets are appropriate, although some would appreciate an additional booklet with extra examples.

Six of the 39 Physical Natural Scientists who responded regretted their choice of the A course, as did one of the 16 Biological Natural Scientists, although at least one student has changed from Mathematical Biology to Maths A.

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

Lecture Course: Dr. Challinor

The lecture theatre (Arts School Room A) is not big enough for the numbers attending the course, and there are routinely thirty or so people sitting on the steps. The students were concerned that this is against Health and Safety regulations, and also that you can't see the board when you are sitting down. Dr Challinor likes to write things out, so this is a disadvantage. He has been giving out full handouts in approximately six lecture sections. Everyone likes his style, the only adverse criticism was about the pace of lectures. Everyone in the class has done Further Maths and they find that he spends too much time going over familiar ground, and doesn't focus enough on the new material. They comment that too much familiar material stops people concentrating on the new stuff and they ask that the lecturer alters his pace to suit. Saturday attendance has been good, possibly because the last batch of the handout was given out on a Saturday. People are not always punctual, and often about twenty are a few minutes late.

The examples sheets are generally thought to be good, and people are enjoying them, but they think that there are not enough examples on the later parts of the course, especially the new bits. There seems to be a difference of style between supervisors with some insisting that students do all the questions, and some selecting questions. Some students who are asked to do

all the questions then don't have time to do the more difficult ones. The staff members commented that this was just a feature of the supervision system, and was not really within the remit of the Committee.

4. Part IA, Scientific Computation: Miss Dalton and Miss Skilbeck reported.

Lecture Course: Prof Dove and Prof Artacho.

Although this course is no longer administered by DAMTP, the student representatives had both received feedback on it, and so it was felt appropriate to note their comments.

Students doing both the A and B courses had similar negative impressions of this course. They did not find the lectures very interesting or useful, and a lot of people left the first lecture before the end. They think that the course notes were better than the lectures, and they suggested that practical classes would be more useful than lectures. Most of them do not use the on-line forums. Many students have no experience of programming and feel that the course assumes too much prior knowledge, and some students are just confused. Many are finding the assignments very difficult.

The students were happy that the software (MatLab) was available only on the PWF computers.

The senior members of the Committee pointed out that this was the first time the course had been run in this form, and they were sure that the students' comments would be taken in to account for next year.

5. Part IB course: Mr Shapera reported.

Lecture course: Dr Caulfield

The feedback on this course has been very positive, especially about the lecturer himself. The overall attendance at the lectures is around 80%, with numerous students citing the lecturer as motivation to attend. The one criticism was that there is not enough space in the handouts for the material that needs to be written in the gaps. The students feel that there are not enough examples, or that the ones given are trivial, and they would appreciate more even if it meant less time for explaining the material. (Note: Since the meeting the final set of lecture notes has been distributed and the students think that it contains a reasonable number of clear, thorough examples.) The pace of the course is much faster than in IA, but it is manageable.

There had been no complaints about the difficulty of the examples sheets. The examples class had not gone very well, and a lot of people had left in the middle.

The computing element of the course is straightforward and manageable.

6. Any other business.

The students commented that they seldom used the resources on CamTools. Most of it just duplicated handouts etc. already given out in paper form, and they had no incentive to look for extra material. They seldom checked CamTools for announcements and so it was not an effective way of drawing things to their attention.

Professor Allanach commented that CamTools was useful from an examiner's point of view as all the material for the course was readily available in one place.

The students said that they would use CamTools if prompted; they just were not in the habit of checking it for notices.

The students confirmed that they still find the book by Riley, Hobson and Bence very useful.

The next meeting will be arranged by circulation and will take place in the first half of the Lent Term.