

Physics & Astronomy Student Staff Council Meeting
Thursday 8 February 2024, 1 pm, Staff Common Room

Present: Graham Turnbull, Janet Lovett, Lucy Hadfield, Claudia Cyganowski, Lilla Barta, Mateo Guzmán Subiría, Ozde Ozkasap, Lewis Thompson, Anna Conti, Luke Campbell, Rory Brown, Ava Kelly, Valerie Bui, Lucy Kappai, Aaron Wafflart, Callum Murison, Nikko Juengsophonvitavas, Tom Rosas, Murray Purkis, Holly Seo, Lachlan Dufort-Kennett, Hugo Decitre, Cameron Rae, Samuel Henderson, Natalia Korolkova, Sam Morrison, Angela Gupta, Paul Cruickshank, Ian Bonnell, Jonathan Keeling.

Apologies: Sebastian Schulz, Theo Cuthbertson

1. Welcome from the School President

The School President introduced the new format for SSC meetings which will allow more time for discussion of relevant topics.

2. SSC Vacation Awards Committee

Two student members were elected to sit on the Vacation Awards Committee: Lilla Barta and Lachlan Dufort-Kennett.

3. External Examiners' reports

The reports from our External Examiners are available on moodle. They are broadly happy with our processes and have many positive comments.

4. Lecture notes and textbooks discussion

Students presented the data they had collected regarding their use of learning resources. There was a strong preference for lecture notes to aid understanding of module material. Lecture notes can be read in advance and annotated in the lecture, provide clarity on what students need to know, and it is easier to review the content of previous modules. Creating typeset notes is time consuming for staff. Textbooks are a useful resource, but students often feel there is a lack of clarity of what is examinable in textbooks, and would appreciate clear direction on which textbook chapters are relevant to lectures. Pre-honours students have not been used to regularly using textbooks in school and find the size of the books intimidating. Physical copies of textbooks are not accessible for students with certain disabilities and they are not all available in alternative formats; copies of textbooks are not always available in the library and the cost to buy is prohibitive. Students would welcome workshops at pre-honours level on study skills including effective use of textbooks, and this is already being considered by module coordinators. Textbooks should be used in conjunction with lecture notes, and it was noted that good lecture notes are not a substitute for attending lectures in person.

5. Independence of study habits

The transition from school to university involves a change to more independent study, and to develop an understanding of the material rather than only knowing enough to pass an exam. The School can help by encouraging use of textbooks and library resources, trying to keep all students engaged in the physics community, and organising more events like the JH Burn conference for other year groups and including joint honours students to help to bring the cohorts together. There is concern about low lecture attendance, and changes in attendance since the pandemic. Modules which included a small percentage in the final grade for engagement created a high administrative burden and did not alter attendance habits. Lecture recordings are available but should be used as a resource to underpin and review learning and are not intended as an alternative to in person lecture attendance.

6. Coding in the curriculum

Students would like an increase in coding earlier in their programme so that they are more prepared for coding tasks in honours modules. This is a particular issue for non-Astro students and joint honours students who have little coding experience by the time they reach JH, and students feel they are spending too much time learning coding than concentrating on physics. Something would have to be removed from pre-honours to fit in more coding early on.

7. Conclusions

There was no time left at the end of the meeting, but the School President thanked everyone for their contributions to the useful discussions.