

MPhil/PhD SSLC Meeting

Wednesday 30 October 2013 (COL 6.15)

Minutes of meeting

Attended: Pauline Barrieu (chair) (PB)
 Paul Kelly (PK)
 Anna Louise Schröder (ALS)
 Ewelina Sienkiewicz (ES)
 Tayfun Terzi (TT)
 Youyou Zhang (YZ)

Minutes: Ian Marshall (IMar)

01.Welcome

PB opened the meeting and thanked everyone for attending. She welcomed PK (Pro-Director for Teaching) and explained that while we struggled to find volunteers amongst our third year and final stage students, all four main research groups were represented – CATS; Risk & Stochastics; Social Statistics; Time Series.

PK explained that he was attending SSLC meetings in the various programme across all departments to observe how the SSLCs function and how well they work in the current format. He explained that he was happy to answer questions, but otherwise was keen for the meeting to proceed as normal.

PB asked the four student representatives how they found being based away from the main department. ALS stated that there would be advantages to being closer to the department, but the study space in Tower 1 was very good, with plenty of room and natural light. TT is satisfied with the study room on the ground floor of Lincoln Chambers and has quickly got to know the other Statistics research students in that room. The room provides a quiet and private study space. YZ prefers to use the School library and likes the livelier atmosphere there. ES is a CATS research student, based within that research centre.

02. Brief overview of the function of the SSLC

PB explained that while the department is happy to discuss any matters throughout the year and encourages such discussion, the SSLC provides a special platform to exchange information and share ideas or concerns and is an important communication tool for the department.

03. Terms of reference and membership of the SSLC

The “Staff Student Liaison Committees Guidance for Chairs and Members” document was included as an attachment with the agenda. This was referenced as setting out the terms of reference for SSLC meetings.

04. Minutes of last SSLC meeting (08/02/2013)

None of the participants present at this meeting were present at the meeting on 8 February 2013. The minutes of that meeting were noted and it was agreed that there were no outstanding matters that required further discussion.

05. Postgraduate research experience survey

The headline scores from the most recent biennial Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) were discussed. Approximately 50 per cent of Statistics research students responded to the survey. The department would like the response to be higher. PB noted that the department generally scored above the LSE average, although not for “intellectual climate” and “professional development and career”. IMar asked if there were any comments about the intellectual climate in the department, noting that three seminar series are offered at which research students network with academic staff, speakers and guests. No negative comments were expressed and it was agreed that the meaning of “intellectual climate” is open to interpretation without further context. ES commented that CATS offers an excellent intellectual environment.

06.Academic and professional development programme

PB brought the “Academic and Professional Development Programme” offered by the Teaching and learning centre (TLC) to the attention of the student representatives. ALS commented that there would be increased benefit and flexibility if some of these workshops were offered more than once per year. PB mentioned that some one-to-one training and mentoring is available on request. The department is also happy to try to arrange in-house quantitative workshops if there is a request and need for these.

07.Orientation feedback

TT commented that he had attended a number of different orientation and induction sessions in a very short space of time and, although useful, this did result in some “information overload”. He found the department PhD induction morning particularly useful because it was very specific to him. Because there were a small number of people present, it encouraged more questions and discussion. The GTA induction sessions were less helpful, although still useful. He found the one-to-one meeting with the department’s teaching co-ordinator (Erik Baurdoux) very helpful and informative.

PB asked if it was better for the department induction to take place early, or after the various School events. Although there were pros and cons to both options, it was agreed that an early departmental induction is very useful, because this can help to inform the School orientation and put some of the information obtained at those into context.

08.Green paper on reform of structure of the teaching year

PK explained some of the background to the consultation on a possible reform of the structure of the teaching year, explaining that moving from the current three term academic session to two semesters of 15 weeks each would allow departments greater flexibility to add value to the degree programme. The advantages of additional exam periods at the end of the (existing) Michaelmas term or at the beginning of the Lent term, as well as in the summer term, were also highlighted. TT mentioned that this might be more appropriate to the undergraduate programmes; whereas in the MSc programmes there was a need to make an association between courses and topics that might be lost by splitting the exams.

ALS, TT and YZ all commented on their familiarity with two semester programmes in Germany and the Netherlands and ALS mentioned that the current LSE 20-week MSc does seem a little short. ALS also mentioned that mid-term exams would provide PGT students with something to show when submitting research degree applications in the New Year period.

PK mentioned that a number of different options could be considered, including two 15 week semesters or three terms of 12 x 12 x 6 weeks. He mentioned the Oxbridge system of 3 x 8 weeks and the 30 week teaching year that is common in American universities (36 weeks at Harvard).

ALS asked if there was a potential financial implication and increase in teaching workloads, particularly for GTAs, pulling them away from the research. PK stated that he did not envisage this being an issue and he expected to see advantages in a drop in repeat teaching and re-takes, with mid-term tests helping to focus the minds of students better.

09.Christmas party/lunch

A Christmas Party at Sway in Holborn will be offered to Statistics students across all degree programmes, with a maximum of 100 places available. The department is also willing to consider ideas from the PhD students for their own event, subject to funding. Ideas should be communicated to IMar, who asked for suggestions as soon as possible due to the likelihood of venues becoming fully booked. ALS said an event for PhD students and academic staff would be good. IMar mentioned that in past years the upstairs room at the George IV pub was booked, with attendance by research students and staff.

10.Any other business

PB mentioned that the School's Research Student' Consultative Forum, chaired by the Dean of Graduate Studies, meets once in each term. The first meeting takes place on 4 December 2013. The department needs a volunteer to attend this meeting.

PB brought the LSE PhD Log to the attention of the student representatives, explaining that it is a tool to record meetings with supervisors and list what was discussed and agreed at those meetings. Amongst

other things, it can be useful for the second supervisor to refer to if she/he has not attended the meeting.

TT mentioned that there is no functionality to edit information and the log is rather unwieldy and inflexible. There is no functionality for a summary and very quickly the information simply becomes a long list of items with no real context. YZ concurred with this and mentioned that it is very time consuming, especially when there are regular meetings with supervisors. PB explained for the benefit of PK that weekly meetings between students and supervisors are quite commonplace in the department. ALS mentioned that she already writes a report in advance of her meetings with her supervisor(s) and a second report after the meetings. The added requirement to record the same information again on the PhD Log seems unnecessary, especially in view of what had been mentioned about its limitations and inflexibility.

PK recommended that the department should feed this information back to the Research Degrees Unit.

ALS reported that computational limitations within the the existing IMT provision is a cause for concern and has a detrimental impact on research progress. IMar explained that the department's research committee has discussed this issue and the department has also been in discussions with IMT about the issue. There are School-level discussions taking place with a view to setting up a pilot High Performance Computing (HPC) hub in the Department of Finance. Another proposal is to negotiate access to the existing HPC facilities available at Imperial and UCL. These discussions are on-going, but it is acknowledged that the Time Series group, in particular, has computing needs that are not currently met by the School's existing provision. The department will try to meet individual needs at a local level. IMar asked ALS to send him an email outlining her additional computing requirements.

PB asked if there were any other items for discussion. TT mentioned that in his first four weeks in the department has was very pleased by the level of support he had received so far.

There were no other items to discuss. PB thanked everyone for attending and brought the meeting to a close.

The next PHD SSLC meeting will take place on a date to be agreed in the Lent term, 2013-14.