Unit questionnaires and examination marks feedback

On the whole the responses to this course on the unit questionnaires were positive and gave the impression that most students had enjoyed the course. However, it seemed that three of the 67 students who responded were pretty dissatisfied with the course.

There were various suggestions for ways in which the course could be improved.

Lectures. A few students asked for more examples in lectures, more explanations in lectures and suggested covering less material more slowly, spending more time on the more difficult topics. A few students commented that the lectures did not precisely follow the on-line notes. Where the order varied this was usually because of the timing within a particular lecture. There were minor differences in the detail since I prefer to construct arguments while giving the lecture rather than copying out my lecture notes as I find that this makes for a better lecture. One student complained that I waffle in lectures and am easily distracted but other students commented favourably on the irrelevant asides!

Problem sheets. One student suggested that it would be useful to indicate which questions on the problem sheets are basic and essential and I will think about doing this when I teach the course next year. There is a danger that the effect of this is that all the other questions are ignored.

Support classes. Most of the critical comments were on the tutorials and it seemed that quite a few students did not find these helpful. It is a bit difficult to know how to use this time more effectively with a class of this size. Some students commented that they were not very interactive but I am unsure how to improve this. I don’t think that the problem arises from a lack of opportunity to contribute and participate. Clearly these classes do not really provide an opportunity to answer questions from individual students if the students do not wish to raise the questions in front of the class as a whole. I do have two office hours a week and I can be contacted at other times and I was a bit surprised that more students did not make use of these since students commented that I am very approachable. Of course quite a few students did contact me either by coming to see me or by emailing me with queries.

Coursework. A few students felt that the coursework was too hard and not really fair since there is some collaboration between students in thinking about the problems. I see the main purpose of the coursework is to encourage students to think about the ideas in the early part of the course and I rather doubt that an in-class test would be as useful. In general students benefit from discussing a course with each other but clearly it is not appropriate for students to work together when doing coursework. I may experiment with an in-class test next year to see what difference it makes to the overall performance.

General. Clearly some students found the course hard and theoretical and struggled with it. It would be possible to give a less formal course in topology with more pictures and fewer proofs but I feel that this would shortchange many students. It is likely that some students were misled into taking this course by the nature of the level 2 course which I teach since the problems on that course are mainly computational rather than theoretical. I do try to alert
students to the nature of the course from the start. Some students wanted more information about `which proofs are examinable`. I do try to indicate to what extent proofs are examinable as we go along but I am reluctant to give a list of examinable proofs since this might suggest that I want students to attempt to learn these proofs by rote which I do not.

**Examination.** One student asked for more past papers. I understand that the policy of providing the past three years’ papers is University policy. This should be enough to indicate the nature of the examination.

When it came to the outcome of the examination, there were quite a lot of very poor marks on MATH31051 with over 25% of the students having a raw mark below 40% and over 15% having a raw mark below 30%. Many of these students appeared to have a poor attendance record and did not appear to have done much work as they didn’t even know basic definitions. I imagine that most of them did not complete a unit questionnaire. However, the general pattern of marks and comparison with the students’ overall performance in the previous year suggested that there should be some scaling up. In doing this I paid particular attention to which students should get a mark of 60% or more (a class 2.1 or class 1 result). When it came to MATH41051 and MATH61051 there were several students who did not appear to have worked at the additional level 4 / MSc material. However, it seemed fairest to scale the marks in a similar way to MATH31051. Some students did extremely well getting almost full marks.

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