

## Focus group on accessibility issues

Run by Penny Gowland 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018

**(Amy Langmead organized this but unfortunately was off sick on the day)**

We had 6 students attend, two first year Natural Science Biology/Physics/Maths, two second year physics students and two third year physics students.

I have reported points we highlighted but not in the order they were discussed, which was issues related to students with physical disabilities, issues related to students with learning differences and issues related to students with mental health issues. We noted that there was a clear cross over between students with learning differences and students with mental health issues (since learning differences cause considerable additional stress).

We were not really in a position to consider the impact of physical differences on students, but we noted that the design of the building must make it very hard to work here if you need to use a wheelchair.

### Problem classes and questions

Most students found problem classes too noisy for them to be able to concentrate and often chose not to attend for this reason (was this particularly when they were located in lecture theatres?)

Students with extra time are likely to work more slowly in problems classes but the demonstrators don't realise this and will sometimes tell them they are going too slowly. *Demonstrators should understand that students need to work at different rates – maybe we should encourage students to report demonstrators who do not understand this so we can better educate the demonstrators.*

Some students felt they were likely to be making demonstrators frustrated but they didn't feel that there was anything to complain about in the demonstrators' behaviour in that regard. *However demonstrators should probably be aware of the need to reassure students, particularly if they are asking a lot of questions.*

Exam questions often describe a scenario which it can be hard to picture. This is a classic mismatch between the education system and the way that some peoples' brains work. Why not simply draw the diagram in the question? This was a big request from everyone in the room. The use of left and right is particularly unhelpful in a question. Introducing similarly shaped symbols in a question is also not helpful (eg k and kappa and K- use A B and C instead) *Teaching committee should consider this up urgently.*

Related to this often the wording on coursework questions was not clear to some students, they considered it fundamentally contradictory or illogical although other students could interpret it maybe by leaping to some obvious conclusions. This was identified as a particular problem in theory modules as if you start off answering the question in the wrong way you can lose all marks. Again this comes down to a difference in the way people's brains work. *Maybe Debbie Varley or a similar person for later years could be available to help with interpreting questions.*

Students also requested more guidance as to the route to an answer as there was not time to be making educated guesses. This comes down to practice, and so more practice with guided answers may be sensible. With the change in availability of past papers there are not many worked examples available any longer. *Make more past papers available to students.*

## **Labs**

In the labs students find it hard to read the sheets in advance without being able to see kit. This is a classic mismatch between the education system and the way that some peoples' brains work. *In the second year lab it would be better to do the demonstration at the end of the previous week rather than the start of the next week. Videos would help in all labs and we should do this immediately.*

In labs students would rather get feedback in person rather than just written feedback. This is a classic mismatch between the education system and the way that some peoples' brains work. *This should be instigated generally for all students in the first year lab (and will be next year with planned changes to staff roles). But should also be offered particularly for students who want it, and student with known learning differences should be targeted and asked to attend for verbal feedback.*

They would like someone to look at their formal report in advance particularly if they don't have anyone else to talk to them about it. *This should be instigated generally for all students in the first year lab (and will be next year with planned changes to staff roles). But should also be offered particularly for students who want it, and student with known learning differences should be targeted and asked to attend for verbal feedback.*

Students requested more practice on basic skills, eg how to draw diagrams of kit. *This could be instigated at start of first year lab as a reasonably fun exercise for week 1 or 2.*

Vivas are stressful in first year lab.. *Make them more like an ongoing conversation during the lab.*

Formal presentations are a problem.. make it easier to give these talks to a smaller group and actively target relevant students to offer this option. The second year lab information was given too early (start of year) and then too late (by email just now). The marking scheme should be more structured. *Give more detailed information earlier.*

## **Careers**

All fine— and labs give you things to talk about at interview

## **Networking, relationships and other issues**

Labs are the primary way that students get to know each other. The way the first year lab and second year lab work assist in this. in biology students are allowed to choose their partners in each session which is stressful. *Ask Biology to change this.* Theory students wont get this opportunity. *Theory course organizers should consider this.*

Math/nat sci/phys students don't mix. This is even worse for nat sci in biology as there are only three students in that group. It is not clear if this is a problem.

The students felt it was hard to contact lecturers, in particular because they assume that lecturers will think them stupid. *Lectures should use moodle to advertise any questions that have been asked, to make students realise most questions aren't stupid, and lectures should consider using "slido".*

Lecture registers add to stress: the students assume that they will be in trouble if they miss a lecture, not that we will be worrying about them. *Clarify the purpose of the lectures at the start of term.*

There is too much delay for counselling.. students are afraid to make appointments as they think they are likely to be better before the appointment comes through. *The students suggested that tutor should be suggested as a first port of call. When referring a student to counselling service*

*please make sure they realise that they can cancel an appointment nearer the time if they end up not needing it.*

Provide a quiet space/chill room for a student in distress (currently they tend to go to the toilet). It needs to be small individual. There are clearly some risks with this. But maybe we could provide some carrels within physics? Maybe in the room next to the women's toilets?