

Covid-19 Physics Focus Groups – Report 1

This is a summary of two focus groups that have been run virtually in the week beginning 4 May 2020. One focus group was run with undergraduate students, and the other with researchers. The second focus group was intended to be mainly with PDRAs, however the group actually included some research staff and PhD students. In both cases some people who were unable to attend the focus group sent their thoughts by email

Two further focus groups will be run in the week beginning 11 May with PhD students, and with school staff.

Summary of undergraduate focus group

All students were keen to stress that they felt the school had done a brilliant job or responding to the crisis. Communication from the school was repeatedly mentioned as being excellent, particularly its clarity, timeliness and that all emails contained useful information (this was often contrasted with other schools, and the university as a whole). The Q&A sessions were noted as being particularly helpful. Students were also happy with our choices about the format of the summer assessment.

General issues that students are having include difficulties concentrating, and the fact that they have lost their informal study groups. Everyone is essentially now studying in isolation, although they are all keeping in touch with other students socially.

There is a lot of anxiety about what will happen in September, how their teaching & learning will be affected, and what impact this might have on their employability in future.

It was noted that the quality of some lecture capture that replaced lectures was very poor. There seems to be a general worry that these poor quality videos will also be used to replace lectures if we restart virtually in the autumn.

The unfortunate combination of the effects of the strike and then the coronavirus pandemic was also noted.

Final year students were, obviously, disappointed that that they will not have a big celebration to mark the end of their degree.

Most students said their tutors had been very helpful and they had had regular contact. But one student mentioned that they hadn't heard much from their tutor.

Suggested Actions

- Run another Q&A session, eg after the exams, to discuss what is known (or not known) about how teaching will restart in the Autumn.
- Students are waiting for an email from the school, clarifying what the university's 'no disadvantage' policy means for Physics students. This should be sent as soon as reasonably possible.
- Discuss further with final year students of there is anything we can do to help them celebrate the end of their degree.
- Check that all tutors are keeping in touch with their students.

Summary of focus group with researchers

Again, people in the focus group were very positive about the school's communication during the crisis, and the town hall meetings were felt to be very helpful. There was a request for another one, or a further update in some form.

There was some confusion about the speeding freeze and why this was affecting small purchases on R-codes. There were also questions about whether it would be possible to pay a registration fee for an online conference at the moment.

The main source of anxiety discussed was around return to work – when that will be and what that will look like. Experimentalists are worried about risks to their experiments associated with restarting after a long down time, and have questions about what technical support will be available to them. There were also specific questions about what the level of cross faculty coordination will be about return to work, eg for projects between physics and engineering. There was also a comment about difficulties of getting contracts set up with external companies without even a provisional date for return to work.

Researchers thinking about their careers in the absence of the summer conference asked for advice on how to give good online talks and seminars.

IT support for getting set up to work remotely seems to have been very different between the different buildings. There was a lot of praise for how good Phil Parry has been about getting CAPT researchers up and running. However, there were some people in the discussion who were still struggling to get access through the VPN or to software licences, they need for their research.

There were questions about whether we knew more about how the research councils were going to handle the next rounds of grant applications.

There was a request to hear more about what our input to the REF consultation had been.

People in the main building were missing the 11am coffee break, but felt that the current break on Teams wasn't working. They felt it was too large a group, the 'etiquette' for the chat was unclear, and that it was too often. Other smaller group coffee breaks, eg the astro Friday cake/coffee were felt to be working well and still be useful.

Researchers with small children mentioned the difficulties they were having with balancing work and child care, and anxiety about how their supervisors will react to this.

Suggested Actions

- Run an online Q&A session for researchers / staff. Consider making this a regular event.
- Consult now(-ish) about what is needed to restart experiments, so that things are not forgotten after a longer time away.
- Put together advice for giving good online presentations (possibly with input from Sixty Symbols team?) or ask the relevant university department to provide this.
- Ensure that different groups within the school have some regular opportunities for socialising – this should probably not be at the whole school level.
- Consider if we need further communication around what should, and should not, be expected of staff balancing work and caring responsibilities.