

# Minutes of the Mathematics Undergraduate Admissions Committee

## Meeting held at 14:00 on Thursday 9 November 2017 in MR15

**Present:** Stephen Cowley (SJC, Chair), Chris Warner (CDW, Subject Convener), Julia Hawkins (JEMH), Eve Pound (EP), Zain Patel (ZP), Orsola Rath-Spivack (ORS, Faculty Admissions Officer), Stephen Siklos (STCS), David Tong (DT), Simon Wadsley (SJW), András Zsák (AZ).

### 1) Welcome

- a) *Apologies and declaration of interest.* There were no apologies and no declarations of interest. Zain Patel and András Zsák were welcomed to their first meeting. The Committee introduced itself.
- b) Julia Hawkins (JEMH) and Stephen Siklos (STCS) were co-opted for a further year.

### 2) Minutes of the MUAC meeting 17 February 2017 and matters arising

The minutes were approved. The following *Outstanding DoS Requests* were discussed:

- a) *Oxford MAT.* ORS has been seeking more information on the outcome of the Oxford MAT. She said she had verbally asked her contact at Oxford, who said there was little correlation between the outcome of university examinations and the MAT. ORS to enquire further.

**Action: ORS**

- b) *Deselection numbers by college.* There was a discussion of deselection next year, i.e. once Mathematics UMS are no longer available. ORS argued we should not use pre-interview testing like Oxford. SJC noted that Cambridge Assessment test has introduced a "*Test of Mathematics for University Admission*" (ToM). It was agreed to enquire whether Cambridge Assessment have data on the effectiveness of the ToM. CDW (as Subject Convener) was asked to provide 'de-selection by college' statistics and circulate these to the MUAC.

**Actions: SJC & CDW**

- c) *Interview feedback.* STCS suggested that interviewers might be sent examples of good interview feedback.

**Action: STCS**

- d) *Further statistics on how risky a STEP 1, 2/2, 1 is.* ORS said she is still working on this obtaining and analyzing this data.

**Action: ORS**

- e) *More cooperative sharing between colleges.* It was noted that there had been an improvement in the functioning of the pools over the last few years. SJC wondered whether there might be still more co-ordination over outreach, summer schools, etc. He was concerned that the effort was disproportionate, and it was not clear that the summer schools had necessarily generated new applicants (rather than moving applicants from one College to another). JEMH noted the coordinating support that the MMP is providing to Colleges.

### 3) Subject Convener's Report

- a) *2016-17 Admissions round.* CDW introduced Julia Gog's Report. It was noted as regards the distribution of STEP grades, that there was a higher correction than usual between grades on different STEP papers. As a result there had been fewer candidates with 1,2 to reprieve than in some previous years; those fishing in the summer pool had been encouraged to consider students with 2,2.

It was reported that the target number of 250 admissions appeared to have been achieved. However, compared to previous years, slightly fewer were taken from the summer pool, with some Colleges that usually fish being absent. In particular, a few DoS would have liked to have taken one or two more mathematicians, but were not able to as some Colleges were overfull with other subjects (as a result of the new procedures necessitated by the lack of UMS in many subjects). This lack of flexibility in

mathematics numbers is likely to be a continuing risk over the next few years, as other subjects adjust to the loss of UMS.

As in previous years, the proportion of women dropped somewhat from offers to admissions.

SJC drew attention to the relative lack of success of home candidates from state schools and in particular those from comprehensives. Compared with other subjects, while mathematics has a relatively high percentage of state admissions, it has one of the lowest success rates for state applicants.

JEMH suggested that the Committee needs to see more data by school type over a few years to spot any trends. CDW said he would be willing to follow this up. JEMH also indicated that a more granular breakdown might help, e.g. she would like to see geographical data.

**Action: CDW**

SJC noted that the analysis of progression data (e.g. by gender, school type) that has been promised in the past, really needs to be delivered soon.

#### 4) STEP matters

- a) *STEP Coordinator's Report.* STCS expanded on his circulated report to the Committee and reiterated that there is one more year of the old syllabus before the new A-level and STEP papers come into force in 2019.
- b) *STEP Classing Criteria.* SJC asked about borderlines and whether they are being fixed optimally. In particular, whether the normalization of about 170 students being awarded 1,1 was appropriate given the difficulties that can arise in years when there is higher/lower correlation between STEP II and STEP III. Instead, given that the target is 250 students, he asked whether the number of students, say, obtaining at least one grade 1, or grades 1,2/2,1, might be fixed at levels closer to the admissions target? There was no consensus, although it was noted that even with the higher correlation this year, the admissions target had been reached. It was suggested that the effect of redrawing boundaries might be examined on previous years' statistics. SJC said that he would try and bring such data to a subsequent meeting.

**Action: SJC**

STCS asked if, with the change of 2019 syllabus, we should change the normalization of the 'S' Grade? It was thought sensible to refer this question to the Director of Studies Meeting.

**Action: STCS**

- c) *STEP Support Programme:* JEMH updated the group. She noted that:
  - some modules are being re-written to align with the new A-Level specification;
  - the support programme continues to create a lot of interest worldwide, although most users are based in the UK (having decided not to make people register it is not possible to tell in detail who is using the system);
  - students in the POLAR demographic target group are known to be using the online programme, although a few such students chose not to attend the 2017 one-day STEP information event at CMS;
  - all state school offer holders would again be invited to a one-day STEP information event during Lent term (the capacity was about 90 students per day), and to counter the feedback that it was "too far to travel", MMP were investigating whether it might be possible to provide a travel bursary and/or accommodation to key students;
  - more Colleges might link to the STEP Support Programme web pages (it was also noted that some College pages need updating);

**Action: ORS**

- assessing the effectiveness of the programme is difficult in that it is not straightforward to correlate the candidates that made their STEP offer with those that used the online STEP support programme and those who attended events.

## 5) Faculty Admissions Officer Report

- a) *Website and Documentation update.* ORS said she will further highlight interview questions on the website. SJC indicated that he welcomed comments on the website to either himself or ORS.

**Action: ORS and Committee Members**

- b) *Open days update.* ORS said that the Faculty Open Days will be booked online; this should make it easier to evaluate feedback. The “mock” interviews demonstrated at Open Days by students were deemed to have been very helpful and effective. ORS indicated that she should welcome any comments or suggestions on the Open Days from members of the Committee.

**Action: Committee Members**

SJC noted that there already exists a University ‘interview’ video clip which could be put online in the ‘Admissions’ area of the website. EP commented on the helpfulness of the information sheets and training for student representatives at Open Days. It was noted that there were advantages to advertising the training well in advance.

## 6) Widening Participation (Including Gender)

- a) *Athena SWAN.* ORS noted that the Faculty had applied for a Silver Award but received a Bronze. A criticism had been lack of impact. It was noted that the gender ratio has not significantly improved at undergraduate level this year (and was, if anything, going in the wrong direction at graduate level).
- b) *Competitor Analysis.* It was reported that, across all their mathematics undergraduate degrees, Oxford had apparently recruited 36% female students (the highest for many years); this emphasized the scale of our task. JEMH said a new section on our website, making more visible the work of women in the Faculty, might help.
- c) *Progression Statistics.* The statistics following cohorts from STEP to Part III are still to be analyzed.

**Action: ORS**

- d) *Varsity Article about ‘Women in Maths’.* The article, available at <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/13945>, was welcomed and viewed as balanced (although the headline was somewhat misleading).

- e) *Flexible Admissions Offer.* SJC apologized for not progressing this, and asked if we should try and do something about this in the next 24 hours, or leave this until next year. After discussion it was agreed that we would see if we could get a case together, and try our hand.

**Action: SJC**

- f) *Commercial Providers of Admissions Support.* There was concern that commercial providers are both exploiting applicants (particularly those from schools without extensive Oxbridge experience), and potentially distorting the interview process. It was agreed that the matter should be raised with the Admissions Forum, and that members of the Faculty should be informed of the nature of these providers and asked to think seriously before agreeing to support/help them.

**Action: SJC**

## 7) AOB

ORS said she would approach Cambridge Assessment to see if they are able to provide progression data and also whether they may be able to help in the analysis of data.

**Action: ORS**

## 8) Date of Next Meeting

To be arranged by SJC.