The Future of Personal Tutor Group Meetings
M Rovatsos, P Jackson. Teaching Committee, 12th March 2014

Background
The Personal Tutor (PT) system rolled out across the University in the last two years mandates holding at least two (three) Group Meetings (GMs) for all undergraduate (taught postgraduate) students. These meetings can support a wide range of objectives, from developing a sense of community and belonging for the students to exchange of experiences and advice among students and group learning activities to enhance either course-related or transferrable skills. The breadth of these objectives is reflected in the diversity with which the scheme has been implemented across different Schools, and which range from purely social events to full integration with lab or tutorial activities. It is not essential that PTs moderate these meetings, though, when they do not, schools are asked to identify ways in which PTs obtain feedback on their tutees’ meetings. Attendance is encouraged, but not compulsory in a strict sense.

Current situation in Informatics
We first started experimenting with GMs in 2012/13, where Innovative Learning Week was used to schedule open-ended meetings among carefully designed groups that covered different years of undergraduate study. PTs and students were given a list of possible activities and topics that the meetings could cover (e.g. course selection, study skills, developing programming skills, years abroad, internships), and advised to select particular activities and topics at the meeting starts. The mixed year nature of the groups was encouraged so that there could be a handing-down of expertise from students in later years to students in earlier years. Turnout at these meeting was mixed, often around 50% or below. Those PTs who responded to requests for feedback on the meetings indicated generally that they felt the meetings had been of some value.

In 2013/14 we changed the way the meetings were set up: in 2012/13 it took a lot of work to create suitably mixed groups and we decided in 2013/14 to simply have each PT organise meetings for their own tutees. In light of this change, the range of suggested possible topics was broadened. In 2013/14 the scheme was also extended to MSc students and the recommended time for the meetings was changed to just after teaching finished in Semester 1. Again turnout was mixed, in some cases down to 1 or 0 students. Again some feedback from PTs and students indicated the meetings were of value, but also a number of PTs and students said that they did not think the meetings worthwhile. A big issue is the open-ended nature of the meetings, without a specific pre-agreed agenda and purpose.

We are now asked to present a plan for future implementation of the scheme, and need to consider various options, as they may have significant resource implications. For some of these, careful consideration needs to be given to their relationship to lab/tutorial activities, peer-assisted learning schemes, and student-staff engagement mechanisms as they would partially overlap with these. We also have been asked to increase the meeting frequency to 2 per year for undergraduates, 3 per year for MSc students.
Possible formats for Personal Tutor Group Meetings
The following is an initial list of possible options for the format of GMs we could adopt in the future:

1. Continuation of the current scheme using more specific group learning materials (developed centrally) that PTs could use to run their GMs. PTs could choose the content most relevant to their group from a number of options.

2. Developing a series of transferrable or study-related skills workshops open to students of all years and delivered by staff or support staff. Every student would be expected to attend two of these events per year and PTs would monitor attendance of their tutees.

3. Using existing teaching activities (e.g. lab sessions and tutorials) in every year to conduct group learning activities specifically tailored to the objectives of the PT GM scheme. Delivery of those might involve PTs but this is not obligatory.

Also to some extent it is acceptable for us to badge existing group-oriented activities (e.g. SDP, IRR, IRP) as fulfilling the role of group meetings, providing we explain carefully how these activities do so.