

## Informatics Student Course Feedback 2017/18

<http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/teaching/surveys/2017-18>

This report contains feedback from students about a course taught in the School of Informatics during the 2017/18 academic year, in response to the following questions:

- What would you say to students interested in taking this course?
- What did you find most valuable about the course?
- What improvements, if any, would you make to the course?
- Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors

Each course organiser receives this report as well as statistics on multiple-choice responses. All these reports, together with student feedback about individual members of teaching staff, are collected and sent to the Director of Learning and Teaching.

Please note that these are personal responses from individual students: some courses only have a few responses and a small sample can be unrepresentative.

Stereotyping and bias, especially unconscious bias, is a serious concern in any survey gathering personal responses. All students received the rubric below before completing the surveys, and you can read a brief introduction to issues of unconscious bias on the university web pages at <http://edin.ac/2iypZBv>

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### **Rubric given to all students taking the end-of-course feedback survey**

We value your opinions on the courses you take here at the University, as they allow us to shape future delivery and development. We welcome constructive comments about your courses, whether positive or negative, and ask you to give details about any issues in order to help the course organiser to understand and address them.

We encourage you to be aware of the potential for bias in the completion of these questionnaires, so we have developed resources which may be helpful to you:

- Equality, Diversity and Unconscious Bias (<http://edin.ac/2iypZBv>)

You also have a responsibility to provide feedback in a manner which does not breach the University's Dignity and Respect Policy:

- University of Edinburgh Dignity and Respect Policy (<http://edin.ac/1Cq0VZY>)

The results of the questionnaires will never be analysed in a way that seeks to identify individual students from their responses. However, should you wish to remain anonymous, please do not identify yourself in your answers to the survey questionnaire implicitly or explicitly.

## Comments Report

What advice would you give to a student taking this course in future?

- Create a group chat so you can all figure out what exactly is wanted from you & what errors are due to errors in the official code.
- DON'T! If you are required to then change your degree. SERIOUSLY! That is unless the lecturer is changed and the coursework is completely different. The lecturer basically gave us a broken piece of software for argument evaluation (that is a topic related to AI) and some broken tools. The assignment was to extend the piece of software to make it slightly less dull and useless (but still way less exciting than the dialogue system developed in the second coursework for Inf2A) and make some research with it. This is pretty much all the instructions we got! There was some attempt at specifying the way in which we should extend the system but it was rather unclear. First big challenge is to fix the broken tools (i.e. install some weird python packages which just do not work unless you do some obscure stuff to your computer (it partially works on DICE but not all of it)). NO credit for that obviously. I think there is no credit for fixing the bugs and bad design decisions in the provided code either. Some credit is available for extending the system. But significant portion is for research and there are no specific requirements on that.
- Don't get too excited about this; the project is not much about AI, although it is interesting and challenging.
- I'd recommend this to students who (like me) are not particularly comfortable with programming because you will get a lot of practice and satisfaction from working on the coursework. Look up the papers on the webpage to see if you find the theory interesting and if not then I would recommend taking one of the other large practicals.
- Switch courses
- Take this course if you want an easy large practical and make sure you have friends in older years so they can provide some guidance, but be prepared to become frustrated at the lack of clarity.
- Take this course, because if you put a small amount of effort into it you'll get a good grade. But you'll hate this course for being useless.
- Ask around about the reputation of the course organiser/lecturer beforehand - you don't want to end up working on this project well into the next semester because the lecturer didn't show up to any lectures and failed to return earlier coursework in time for the deadlines of later courseworks, which are dependent upon the former.
- An absolute waste of time, the complete lack of organisation left us all stressed/unsure if things would get sorted out, and the actual course has very little to do with AI. Do not take this course.
- Avoid taking this course if Dr Alan Smaill is still going to teach.
- DON'T. If you have to, change your degree. Seriously. (That is unless both the lecturer is changed and the coursework is changed for an entirely different topic.)
- Do not take this course! If you are considering taking it, first try to hear from at least one of the students who took it in '17/'18 and you will understand why. It was by far the worst experience I have ever had at UoE. Unless both the curriculum and the course organiser (Alan Smaill) change, this course should not be an option. If you have heard complaints about CSLP and SELP, trust me, it was nothing compared to AILP. Let me just tell you that the professor did not come to the first lecture and he did not explain this even weeks after it happened (and no, the ITO didn't know anything further either). And this was just a very gentle beginning compared to the rest of the course (which, by the way, lasted for 2 semesters instead of 1 for many of us).
- Do not take this course.
- Don't take it unless it's compulsory and if it is then raise issues as soon as they arise so that as many people as possible know about them. This course has been plagued with issues for 3 years now, with this year being the worst yet, so I really hope for the sake of future students that it can be improved.
- Don't!!!!!!!!!!!!!! This course is hell.
- Don't.
- If nothing changes you are better off taking SELP, it will teach you more. Only take this course if you want to spend less time on a less interesting project that you will get nothing out of
- If you can avoid it, avoid it. Unless a major change in the course is underway, this course will not teach you a great deal and its horribly managed.

## Comments Report

What advice would you give to a student taking this course in future? (continued)

- If you don't have I'd advice not to.
- The lecturer was not very speedy in terms of responding the issues and concerns with coursework, hence student need to figure out a lot from the course slides and provided readings by themselves and peers.

## Comments Report

What did you find most valuable about the course?

- Having to work on a larger-scale project and make design decisions
- How it combined so many different activities from researching papers to extending existing implementation to exercising good documentation and coding practices to working with natural language tools...
- Improving my python skills and reading academic papers which allowed me to develop an approach to completing the task. The theory is very interesting and I liked hearing about real-world examples.
- It didn't cut into my schedule.
- It is an easy and interesting coursework, different from what we have done so far
- It was easy - my grade for this course is going to improve my average (hopefully). I also liked the fact that we had to use Python. Learn how to use BibTeX.
- Nothing was valuable. Or if there was something, then I cannot see it in the large pile of things with highly negative values.
- Being able to improve my Python skills working on a task with scope to try different approaches. I liked having the option of an oral or written report for the final coursework, although it was only announced after many students had spent a great deal of their time writing the report.
- I found informal logic kinda interesting.
- I learnt how to use python doctests.
- I wanted to answer "Virtually nothing" but there were, in fact, a few things – though completely unrelated to AI: I learned more about how the School works internally and how it resolves issues (and sometimes does not), which is valuable indeed. The course has also taught me not to take pieces of coursework worth 10 credits (and my entire final grade), as well as any rules, too seriously.
- It presented an interesting problem
- Learning to work things out for myself and cooperate with coursemates to understand what on earth was going on
- N/A
- The ability of reading papers and articles on myself.
- The background of research was quite interesting
- The idea of using Carneades to model dialogue.
- improved my python skill

## Comments Report

What improvements, if any, would you make to the course?

- Change to the topic from argumentation systems to something more relevant today. I don't have a problem with argumentation systems in general and I see why one would offer them, however, I do not think that this topic is suitable for a compulsory 20 credit course.
- I would completely redesign it from scratch. For example: - The topic of the coursework is vaguely related to AI but the work it asks us to do has nothing to do with AI at all. (Inf2D coursework would be much more relevant although it was quite awful as well.) - Give students tools that actually work so that they can focus on the AI bit rather than on fixing someone else's bugs and horrible design decisions. Currently it is more like a Software Engineering exercise from hell, no AI whatsoever.
- Lecture schedule decided at the start of the course rather being announced the night before (as the first lecture for Assignment 3 was). Please please please can there be a teaching assistant! I know people in previous years have been angry about the time taken to receive feedback on the coursework but of course it takes so long when there is only one person having to mark something that people have done in a myriad of ways. I found that the best way to get help was in a lab session rather than piazza which was not frequently answered and so a teaching assistant would be so beneficial in helping to provide more lab sessions and to answer questions on piazza. Receiving the feedback from the first for-credit coursework before handing in the second coursework would be very beneficial too.
- More timely feedback on assignments.
- Please, please, please, make the coursework more clear. Especially this 3rd assignment, which contains so many perplexing questions which we haven't been warned about. Also, please, make the project more about AI and less about general software engineering.
- The lecturer gave vague specifications, wasn't very responsive to Piazza questions, and didn't even issue official bug fixes for errors in his own code that students spotted. The main challenge of the course was not the coding or designing, but understanding what exactly was required of us. The project didn't even make use work on actual AI, but more on a parser for an already-provided environment.
- The requirements definitely need to be more precise - it's taking students more time to figure out the requirements than actually write the code which is not what should happen for a big project like this. The response rate on piazza is very low and the quality of the responses can also be improved. It is very often that my colleagues and I found ourselves in the position of understanding even less than we did before asking a question as replies are often even more ambiguous than the requirements. I am not even hoping to get some feedback this semester because I know it wasn't the case for last years' students. More lectures would be helpful. The provided code has bugs and is sometimes inconsistent with the coursework requirements. Test files are sloppily written and it feels like there is not much genuine interest in this course.
- The topic is super niche, I really don't care about law. Can't we make it something more interesting and general? Honestly, this is a 20 credit compulsory course, so why can't there be some more flexibility? I understand that the course is about students individually studying a topic and then solving a problem, but that shouldn't mean absolute confusion about a number of things. For instance, has the lecturer actually done the assignments? I feel some things they ask us to do in the assignments are completely useless. So I wish they were clearer about what they want and would make sure those requirements make sense. Emphasis on the latter.
- This course needs to be completely revamped.
- 1. Issuing an apology to all AILP '17/'18 students and an honest promise that nothing like this will ever happen again in School of Informatics. Otherwise, it will surely come as no surprise that many students will strive to publicise their experiences connected with the unacceptable and highly unprofessional approach of Sol (taken not just by Mr Smaill, but also the lack of communication from Mr Anderson's side) so as to give other potential students of Sol@UoE a timely and justified warning. 2. Either cancelling the entire course or ensuring that the curriculum is actually teaching students about up-to-date artificial intelligence systems, techniques and approaches, and not just about pseudo software engineering and one extremely outdated system (CAES) that is not even compatible with its underlying mathematical model (Gordon, Prakken, Walton, 2007). 3. Ensuring that Mr Alan Smaill is not permitted to teach the course anymore because, disregarding his personal issues, he showed us that he is not capable of the basic communication with students (not sending a single e-mail in a few weeks' time on multiple occasions when, clearly, an action on his side was actually required and was not being taken – for reasons that have not been explained to this day).
- A new lecturer - Alan Smaill is a lovely and approachable person but has proven that he is not fit in any way to lecture or mark this course. A teaching assistant in addition to a lecturer is REQUIRED so that marking can happen in a timely fashion and so that there can be more help through drop-in lab sessions. Start earlier in first semester to avoid this course dragging on and affecting second semester deadlines,

## Comments Report

What improvements, if any, would you make to the course? (continued)

- Change the format of 3 1 hour long lectures for the whole 20 credit course into seminars where the first hour is a lecture and the second half is a Q&A about the theory and coursework including class discussion on the theory/real-life applications and news stories related to the project.
- Better organisation, quicker feedback, more lectures, more lecturer input, clearer explained assignments, better assignment punctuality.
- Change the lecturer - he is not fit to be teaching this course. Or give him a TA!
- Make the objectives clearer and have a good supervisor in charge.
- Reorganise the structure of this course and make the coursework specifications more explicit, reply to emails earlier than in a month's time
- The course organiser organised the course very badly. There was little help through email, Piazza, or office hours. The feedback was very unclear as well.
- The course structure was overall fine, but it could have benefited from the addition of a course organiser/lecturer, perhaps in order to answer Piazza questions, mark coursework, and present slides at timetabled occasions.
- The coursework objectives could be clearer, the lecturer said at the very end (in January) that we were meant to implement the idea of critical questions in whatever way we wanted, but the previous coursework outlined specific objectives and the change in the assignment's structure was not made clear at the outset, he just answered questions vaguely and inconsistently throughout which would have made more sense if he had made explicit that we were supposed to be creative with it. Overall more support on piazza would be a significant improvement as many questions went unanswered. Marks and feedback returned in a reasonable timescale would also be nice.
- This course was so badly organised and run that I don't even know where to start.
  - Assignment 2 was due early November, while assignment 3 was due late December of semester 1. We are currently at the end of semester 2, and some students are still waiting for the lecturer to correct his marks for the second assignment, and no one has yet received marks for assignment 3.
  - The lecturer has been highly unresponsive; we have had to get an extension for assignment 3 for early January as he was completely inactive on Piazza and was not responding to emails. He then organised for students to be able to pick an oral report instead of the written report, which would be done during Innovative Learning Week as students would have less workload then; however, he didn't communicate with us at all and we received an email a few weeks later, out of the blue, stating that the oral reports would take place in late March (no explanation, no apology, and setting the time to a very busy deadline-heavy end of semester time??)
  - The actual assignments have very little to do with AI (practically all of assignment 2 is building a parser). What is more, the lecturer isn't clear in his replies, gives conflicting answers, the assignment specifications conflict with the literature we are meant to read, and assignment 3 is meant to be "open-ended" (which, in this case, meant that we had no clear guidance on what we had to do).
  - There were inconsistencies in the marking (people were given/taken points for the same implementation choices, the lecturer didn't follow the student's updated instructions on how to run the code), and many, many times the lecturer replied to emails saying he'd reply tomorrow/the following week, only to never actually follow-up.
  - Just to reiterate, this semester 1 course ran THROUGHOUT SEMESTER 2 (the oral reports for assignment 3 took place end of March, to which the lecturer was one hour late, and the examination time was inconsistent, varying from 15 minutes to 30 minutes). Throughout that time, we had absolutely no certainty or idea as to whether we'd get our marks corrected, when we would receive our final grade, or what the next step was. The fact that this course stretched for so long is frankly ridiculous and took a toll on all of us, when some of us specifically had taken more credits in the first semester so as to compensate for SDP. It is absolutely shameful that the course has still been kept this way, even after last year's students had a similar experience. It is in need of a complete overhaul.
- Well, any random change would probably be an improvement. To start with, I would make sure the course only runs in the semester that it is supposed to run in. Then I would change the coursework for something that has something to do with AI.
- More organized structure of teaching and support for student queries about coursework since this course is 100% coursework based.

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## Comments Report

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Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors

- No tutorials, workshops or labs for this course.