

## 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?

- - Take this course and prepare to put lots of time in it, you will get the payback in terms of understanding more about natural language processing. The lecturer Sharon is very good.
- - Make sure you already know how to program. - The probability tutorial should be compulsory before starting the course to aid later lectures
- Although the class might seem very difficult at first, if you put the effort in, it will get easier with time. Depending on your background, it might feel impossible for the first few weeks, but just keep with it!
- Always keep updated.
- Make sure you deal with all the stuff required to cover. Don't lose confidence if you are also from linguistic background or other non-CS background.
- Assignments are challenging. So start early!
- Be prepare to study a lot and enjoy as you go.
- Definitely read up on some of the core J&M chapters, such as N-grams, HMMs and some coding practice with Python!
- I really enjoyed this course, I learned a lot. Although, I would highly recommend reading about linguistics before starting the course to make your life easier. It was very challenging, especially at the beginning.
- I will speak as a student with a linguistics background. Study the material before the first lecture. Not the whole book necessarily. At least the first chapters to have a head start so that you will be able to be prepared before the lectures. Some chapters might take longer to understand so it's good that you have started the book early.
- It's tough, but really rewarding and interesting
- Keep up with notes during the term, depending on your background it can be a pretty straightforward course but there is a large volume of material you will need to know for the exam! Sharon is an exceptional lecturer. She is really engaging and obviously very knowledgeable and can make even some of the very dry introductory stuff interesting. It is a good course to take if you are look for an overview / introduction to NLP.
- Make a study group.
- Only take this course if you like linguistics, \_and\_ if you are not afraid to use mathematical concepts together with linguistics concepts. Prepare for each lecture/lab/tutorial in advance. It's important to keep up with the rhythm
- Review
- Start early, try to keep up with the course content. You don't have to get deep understanding for each topic. Assignment 1 seems easy but people usually get less marks because of how they have written the reports.
- Start with the reading early!
- Stay on top of the material at all cost - it's called accelerated for a reason.
- Stay up to date with the lectures. If you miss one it's not the end of the world, but make sure to watch the recording.
- Study study study! Attend lectures, and give yourself plenty of time to revise before the exam. There's A LOT of information that's covered in this course.
- The one interested in natural language processing, and with basic programming skill.
- This course will probably make you feel dumb sometimes. The concepts can be really complex, but if you actually complete the tutorial problem sets, you'll learn a lot. I would absolutely recommend forming a study group to solve tutorial questions before the session. Talking through the problems with peers is really helpful, even if you don't get all the answers. Take advantage of online resources like the Jurafsky Martin YouTube series. Re-watch lectures-- it's amazing what the pause button will do for your understanding.

Comments Report

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

- Tough, fair, engaging.
- take each lecture seriously and do the previews

## Comments Report

What did you find most valuable about the course?

- - Challenging assignments which reflects the real world application of the theories covered in the class. Exam revision guide. Working with partners during assignments really help to connect with people from different backgrounds
- - The questions at the start of slides. - Sharon.
- Doing the assignments is helpful for understanding key concepts.
- Enno Hermann and
- Everything. Lecturers are excellent (esp. Sharon Goldwater), tutorials and labs are useful, forums are super helpful (quick response from lecturers and tutors), feedback is always informative. This is the best ever lesson I have ever taken so far.
- Exercises and assignments and recording the lectures. In term of the knowledge, I got deep information about the NLP even though I never studied any LP courses before.
- Hand simulating things, I think it will help in later study of NLP.
- I get a rough map of NLP, esp. Syntax
- I liked the assignments, they really made me help to understand the topics better! The recordings! Especially at the beginning I still struggled a lot with the comprehension of spoken English and so it was very helpful to have the opportunity to stop and rewind certain passages!
- It is clear how much thought Sharon put into designing the course, and trying to make the content as accessible as possible. She is a very good lecturer and really tries to help students understand the content. Her expectations for students are also very clear overall.
- One of my favourite courses this semester. Sharon is an incredibly knowledgeable and intellectually stimulating lecturer.
- Skills of nlp
- That we had a lot of practical experience with what we were being taught.
- The assignments
- The assignments were really helpful for putting what we were taught into practice and solidifying our knowledge of it.
- The fact that it managed to cram together a wide variety of ideas and problems within computational linguistics, but did this in an effective way.
- The group-based approach to the coursework. It's a great way to discuss and make sure you understand the content.
- The lecturer, the way the material was presented, the assignments
- The main instructor, Sharon was amazing. Really enthusiastic and great at explaining very difficult concepts. Also, great to have a woman teaching a STEM module!
- The scope of the material is great - I feel like I've learned a lot (and it deserves to be called Accelerated for sure). I've enjoyed the applied approach taken in the course - I've always felt that I know why we are learning particular concepts and where that can be applied (and what are the limitations and follow-ups). Not to mention that Sharon was amazing at explaining the material and keeping the class engaged.
- The structure is perfect. Intensive but do-able.
- The tutorials and labs were very helpful for the understanding of the material!
- This course was incredibly challenging, but it was set up in a way that forced me to work through difficult formulas and problems instead of just throwing my hands up in the air and giving up. The tutorials, though extremely awkward (no one ever knew enough to volunteer answers), were really helpful for my understanding. Sharon does an excellent job of relating material to practical applications, which is really important for information as complicated and abstract as this. She knows the material backwards and forwards, so when students have questions, she always manages to answer

## Comments Report

What did you find most valuable about the course? (continued)

- This was my favourite class even though half the time I was horrendously confused.
- Tutorials were very helpful, and lectures and assignments were interesting. The extra TA hours were very helpful, because there didn't seem to be any other place to ask questions about the assignments that weren't easy to write down on the Piazza forum (usually programming help or going over relevant sections of the lectures/textbook).
- Variety of material covered
- Was a good mix of linguistics, mathematics, and programming (which seems representative of what the field of MLP requires). Looking at machine learning methods. the textbook is also clear and a good resource
- the assignments are very useful for me to learn more about the NLP
- way to study

## Comments Report

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

- More lab sessions
- Add an introductory lecture where students get to see the whole picture of what's going to happen in the course. For example, the sub parts of the course (syntax, semantics, parsing, dependencies, disambiguations and its types) and how they are all related to each other. I felt that at the end of the course when the student goes through all the topics then he realizes the content structure and relation between all the topics , however, if presented early, can be used as a guideline by students for self-study
- Assignment brief can be misleading. Marked down for following examples from the actual brief.
- Assignments could worth more (e.g. assignments 45%, exam 55%)
- Having more of an overall structure/flow that breaks down the syllabus into segments/units would make it easier to understand the overall content of the course. The quality of the lecturers vastly differed.
- I really cannot understand the Data and evaluation part... I think the Question page in slides is useful but some slides do not contain it. The latter half of the courses are not organised very well compared with the first half. The structure is not clear enough for me, esp. Topic models and Data, evaluation. It is pity we do not have question answering and sentiment courses this semester~
- I really enjoyed the lecturing style of Dr. Sharon Goldwater, and the content of the lecture always deepened my understanding of, e.g. the readings and other materials. This was unfortunately not the case for Dr. Dorota Glowacka, who often presented very bad slides (with unreadable book scans), only summarised the book content (instead of restructuring and rephrasing the content, as Sharon did) and even occasionally gave false information (about statistics and LSA). If she will be a lecturer on this course again next year, I would prefer if she would discuss and collaborate more (beforehand) with Dr. Sharon Goldwater to improve those lectures.
- I think a lot of assumptions were made for the first assignment that work in programming classes had already been covered and it made it excessively hard for those just learning to program!
- I think for this assessment, it should be imperative informatics students are paired with students from other courses to help aid in this assignment.
- I'm sorry to say that, but I feel like Dorota's lectures were much less engaging and quite hard to follow. I felt mostly confused and tired after them (and found reading the book alone much more beneficial), which is a shame. I guess, it's more the presentation style of a person rather than anything else, but I feel like grammar concepts should have been given "more love", as a non-linguistics international student I got lost pretty fast.
- Increase the time for labs and tutorials. I think it would be better to add a lab session each 2 weeks and a tutorial session each week. That is because we never solved all questions during the sessions.
- It would be helpful to have more foundation maths material available for students (for example the maths and notation basics videos by Simon King on Speech Zone would have been very helpful for me at the beginning of the year). I think a huge hurdle for me at the beginning of the course was just understanding the notation.
- Lecture slides should be uploaded at least 24hrs in advance.
- More formative feedback would be good - the labs were too big this year and (it felt like) there was no interaction between students and instructors. The extra help hours seemed to drop off after a few weeks - I don't mind emailing the TA to say that I would like to attend the help hour, but after a while it was difficult to tell if they were on at all? Three different partnered assignments is a lot, and working with just one other person is intense and leaves a lot of scope for things to go badly wrong in a busy semester. I don't know whether bigger groups for some of the assignments would be a better or worse idea -but for one of the assignments I found it really difficult to work with the other person, and it would have been easier if there was someone else to dilute him.
- More questions at the end of the lectures' slides. The lectures with Dorotha were a bit less clear.
- More, smaller assignments, and maybe less percentage of the total grade being dependent on the final exam.
- No. It's almost perfect.

## Comments Report

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

- Please more hours of tutorial next year! If we had many questions we didn't have time to discuss everything. Piazza is a good alternative but it's not the same as having the tutor explain face to face. The tutor knows you personally and can explain better because of this.  
The last assignment was issued on the 10th of Nov and due on the 27th of Nov. I think at this point we should have focused on revising and studying the new material. Not on an assignment. You could have given only two and split the 30 points in 2 assignments (15-15). It did help our understanding of the concepts but it also made us tired and some people may be dropped studying for the lectures because of this. I know I did. And what is more I was left only with 2 weeks for revision. Also make the assignments optional. Tell students they have to submit them to pass but the mark doesn't count. We will learn the same but with less stress. Stress is bad for quality. And it's not that ANLP is the only course we have to stress over.
- Practice more
- Room sizes of tutorial, 1 or 2 people always had to sit on the windowsill or stand because there were neither enough chairs nor enough place on the table.  
I also found it kind of annoying that the lab was "occupied" by other students. I would prefer another lab (smaller room) which would then be entirely blocked for classes/labs.
- Sometimes lecturers ran out of time to explain things, maybe less attention should be put on the introduction of topics and more attention should be put on the harder bits that require more explanations.  
Also, not all lecturers were equipped to teach. Dorota Glowacka's lecture slides were basically copy pasted material from Jurafsky and Martin's book with no further explanations/confusing explanations. That is completely unacceptable. Not to mention that she had to read off those slides at all times and most of the time wouldn't even notice if people had questions. I understand that it may be her first time teaching, but that does not justify such incompetence.
- The lectures felt a bit disjointed at times, likely due to the amount of stuff we needed to cover in order for a sufficient background for future courses to be developed. Maybe play around with the order of the lectures. It felt like we covered a ton of things at a shallow depth, which is necessary to cover it all, but as a result we have so much to remember and it's hard to build a "narrative" of everything we covered. Also, do not have Dorota lecture - I often walked out of her lectures more confused about the topic than I was before.
- The lectures of Dorota Glowacka didn't explain her material as well as those of Sharon Goldwater.  
The coding quality used for assignments: mixed 2/4 space indents in assignment 3, or a function returning either 1 or False in assignment 2. I liked the object-oriented architecture for assignment 2, though!  
It took me ten weeks to realise that "to shoot an elephant in my pyjamas" is not a phrasal verb, and that this sentence was meant to be parsed literally.
- fairly good
- only one lecturer

## Comments Report

Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors

- More review
- Tutor was very helpful and patient.
- Dedicated computer room for labs so we don't have to wrestle it away from others.
- I found tutorials invaluable for understanding the material and labs - for trying the concepts out.
- I thought that the tutors were all fantastic!! They were really approachable and friendly, it was a great help for tutorials and lab sessions,
- Labs often had a sudden jump in difficulty where the first half of the questions were straightforward, and the latter half inaccessible especially without much of a coding background.
- My tutor was Anna Currey! She was the best! Very well organised, explained everything so well that even me that had a linguistics background could understand. She also explained basic concepts students weren't familiar with, even though we were probably expected to know them. She encouraged conversation between students and tutor and that made understanding easier.
- My tutor, Nikos, was knowledgeable and helpful when students asked questions, but was also rude at times when a student was struggling to find the correct answer.
- My tutor, Shay, was really great. He gave very clear explanations and did a really good job of getting everyone to participate. Thanks Shay!!
- Should have more tutorials, just 1 hour per two weeks not enough.
- Super good.
- The ANLP tutorials were the highlight of the week. Perhaps consider making them weekly?
- The goals of the labs were often a bit less clear than for the assignments, and I enjoyed the assignments more and learned more from them. I did not benefit at all from the tutorials, as they were too short to really discuss anything or help anyone who had problems understanding something. I think it is a very boring way, just calling students out to go through the solutions on the board. We had our own study group before the tutorials, which was much better and where I usually learnt enough so I would practically not have to go to the tutorial anymore.
- The tutor makes all his efforts to help us.
- The tutorial was really helpful!
- The tutorials caused everyone I spoke to a lot of anxiety. When no one knew the answer (which happened a lot), the mentors would randomly choose someone to solve the problem on the board in front of everyone. No one likes to showcase how confused they are, even if other students are confused too. I wish the mentors had been willing to solve the problem on the board themselves, going through it step by step. The current set-up made me really want to skip the session entirely sometimes and just get the answers later.
- The tutorials of Enno Hermann and Anna Currey were top-notch. They understood the subject very well and were eager to explain the material to the students.  
The tutorial of Marco Damonte did not teach me anything: he didn't teach understanding, and he was satisfied if someone got the answer right, through what seemed rote memorisation of the formulas.  
In many cases, the tutorials were too easy to do: I could've used more thinking so that I can't solve all of them on a bus ride.
- The tutorials were very helpful - the labs were not.
- The tutors were great for this class and were always very helpful in the lab! They helped me through problems without me feeling like they were talking down to me or judging me for not understanding things--They hit the perfect balance of explaining things clearly without sounding condescending.



## Comments Report

Please add any other comments you have about workshops and tutors (continued)

- Tutorials were hugely important and related to the coursework descriptors.
- admiring
- the tutorials and labs were fairly mechanical, especially with problems involving walking through algorithms by hand or filling in large tables