

Sociology Student forum

26th of March 2015

Participants:

Students: Nicola ALLISON; Brenna ASTON ; Ilinca BARSAN; Craig BRIDGES; Sophie DECAMILLI; Marie LARSSON ; Hannah RAE.

Staff : Ross BOND, Isabelle DARMON, Steve KEMP.

The staff forum is meant as a new space for staff and students to discuss the Sociology degree (single and joint honours). It replaces the 'student staff liaison committee' which used to be held each semester between a member of staff and student reps for the 4 years. The forum is meant as a more 'direct' way of staging this discussion, as all students, from all 4 years, are invited to take part, though student reps will continue to play a facilitation role. The idea is also to break with opinion gathering and rather to foster the collective discussion, elaboration and construction of views.

This first edition of the forum was an attempt to move in this direction, and certainly there was good exchange and the issues addressed were not only directly concerned with the structure of the degree but also with what kind of sociologists students develop into. However participation was disappointing: only 4th year students took part. We hope to be able to stimulate more interest in the forum next semester.

Students were asked to discuss how their sociological understanding and engagement with 'the world' had developed over the course of the degree, and how they had progressed in how they learn – and what difference the degree had made in each case. Finally they were asked what they thought the qualities of a graduate to be. Staff joined after 20'.

Summary of main points

The time at the University and in the degree has been 'life altering'. 'We're more self aware, more reflexive'. This sometimes is exhausting – there is constant 'checking of one's privilege' as a 'very vital part of being a sociologist'. 'Teach us how to turn off please!'

There was a sense of having acquired knowledge of a breadth of topics as well as theoretical, critical and qualitative competences – students felt well equipped to do a good literature review but other steps in the conduct of research felt less secure. The students felt that they could have generally been given a broader experience of different research methods; and they

suggested introducing more practical 'doing' activities to Honours option courses – e.g. Intoxication was cited as an exemplar.

Students wished they had been introduced to the quantitative dimension of sociology earlier in the degree (e.g. through examples, assignments etc.), rather than rather suddenly in the DSR course in semester 2 of year 3. This is now in part addressed in the degree and School through fundamentals and Q-step teaching. Interestingly however the students taking part in the forum stressed that it is not enough to have a course in statistics – but that the use of such analyses should be more frequent in other courses, so that producing/using stats becomes more routine. This would also make students more confident to analyse quantitative data in the Sociology projects.

There was also a sense that Honours courses tend to rely on small group discussions/work a lot, and this did develop skills for group discussion – but other activities such as presenting a reading would also be beneficial and foster different skills. This would also address the problem of long reading lists – which can then be broken down between various students taking responsibility. Whilst lectures were generally found good, students thought tutorials required more staffing and resources.

There was a discussion around modes of assessment: some thought the usual 25/75 distribution in Honours increased risks of a bad mark overall, but most participants viewed this as a valuable model, with short essays allowing to get some practice in the course and the long essay being an opportunity to 'doing a piece of work properly'. However the point was also made that predominant assessment through long essay encouraged a rather selective approach to course engagement, especially when students could choose to focus their essay on only one week of the course and neglect other sessions. One way of addressing this might be to set assignments that require inclusion of material from across different sessions. There was some discussion of the merits of assessing tutorial participation.

There are phases in Honours when it feels very lonely, very few contact hours: especially in year 4 semester 1, with just one hour of class per week. Students considered the possibility to organise themselves and obtain a 'project room' where people could 'congregate and bounce off ideas from each other'. Even to book a room for an hour or two each week during S1 might help, as an optional drop-in opportunity with 1-2 staff present to advise if need be. This could easily be booked to avoid clashes with optional courses or we could book for 2 separate hours each week to give students an alternative to avoid clashes.

The lack of a sociology specific common room was keenly felt. There was a desire to have more opportunities to build the sociology 'community' – e.g. through common trips. Connection with staff was good, participants in the forum found staff friendly and approachable, and this compared favourably with other disciplines.

As could be expected the future felt a bit daunting at this stage (end of 4th year), although students knew they could visit the Careers service and especially Kay Barbour. More careers workshops could usefully be organised with Sociology, for example with former graduates.

Proposed action points:

- Explore ways of diversifying modes of seminar teaching in Honours, including perhaps more practical tasks for students to complete as opposed to the lecture/discussion format ;
- Encourage quantitative analyses more across the board in more Honours courses as well as earlier in the degree rather than just in the dedicated courses such as DSR;
- Explore possibility of supporting student-led 'project room' and 'project sessions' (including through staff presence);
- Disseminate information about events organised in the Sociology 'community' and support the organisation of other events;
- Explore possibility of organising careers workshops in Honours.
- Explore whether more resources might be available to support more small group teaching, especially at Honours level (this would also tie in with the University's emerging teaching 'vision')
- Review general structure of assessment in optional Honours courses