SPECIAL STAFF-STUDENT LIAISON COMMITTEE,

FEBRUARY 6TH 2009

PRESENT: Ksenia Panjinskaia, Louise Boyd, Tirion Seymour, Sam Barber, Nick Prior (convenor)

MINUTES: Nick Prior

PURPOSE

1) This special meeting was convened at the request of the Director of Undergraduate Teaching to garner more detailed student views on the issue of feedback. Student reps were asked to collect information from their class cohorts on this issue and report back to the committee.

2) Reps were also solicited for their views on a SSPS proposal to introduce Peer Assisted Learning and Support (PALS). A document specifying the various models currently used in other subject areas was circulated and reps were asked to comment on how useful they might be for the purposes of SSPS under-graduate students.

AGENDA ITEMS

PEER ASSISTED LEARNING AND SUPPORT

Model 2 (Helpdesk): was not considered a strong candidate because it did not provide much in the way of unique functionality – students could gather much of what was on offer in tutorials, lectures, office hours, EUSA workshops. In addition, it was seen as uninviting and formal.

Model 4 (Autonomous Learning Groups): the problem identified here was the possibility of ending up in groups that were internally divided.

General approval was given to some configuration of Models 1 and 3 (a mix of mentoring / parenting): these models were providing new functions that students would find useful and welcoming; there could be a social element built in (although there was some caution against the idea of an American-style "fraternity" system); the networks established were more informal, and these models would fit better with the needs of SSPS students.

-It was also noted that some configuration of these two models might spark unintended consequences, such as the resurrection of sociology-based student societies.

FEEDBACK

Reps reported back the information they had collected from their peers in response to specific questions about feedback. Whilst the response rate to these questions was not good, reps were still able to report a mix of informal and formal responses from their cohorts.

1. Has feedback on my work been prompt?

-In general, no. Compared to other subjects (e.g., history) feedback in sociology takes longer; often longer than the three week promise.

-Picking up essays can also be confusing and emails could be clearer regarding *which* essays can be collected (some assessed work, for instance in the "Designing/Doing Social Research" courses cannot).

-First years, especially those whose English was not a first language, found the WebCT interface confusing and could not navigate easily to find marks.

2. Have I received detailed comments on my work?

-In general, no. Exams in particular were highlighted as a problem here. Generic feedback is often seen as a fudge or compromise, more useful to the staff and the subject area than the students.

-Students did not feel that having sight of a generic "overview" of exam quality meant anything to them individually: for instance, where they went wrong on their own individual scripts. First years found lack of individual exam feedback to be problematic, generic feedback was not considered meaningful.

-Students often forget what they had written in the exam months after.

-Slightly more positive response to the idea of "feedforward" of generic feedback tied to revision tutorials.

-Timetabling specific points when students can have sight of their exam scripts is seen as inflexible.

3. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.

-The potential introduction of new essay marksheets was praised: students were happy with the volume of comments (one or two paragraphs) but preferred more specific comments that referred to specific parts of the essay.

-It was frustrating when very generic comments are made in the margin: e.g., "expand", given word limits.

-Some mention was made of distributing the "right" answers (where appropriate) for "Designing/Doing Social Research" courses after the work has been marked, to give students an idea of where they went wrong.

4. Alternative forms of Assessment and Feedback?

-Strong antipathy towards getting students to mark each other's presentations or work: students tended to trust lecturers more than their peers to assess quality.

-New digital forms of assessment (blogs, for instance) have general approval, particularly because feedback is constant throughout the course. However, there can be some confusion amongst students regarding what is expected, what staff are looking for, etc.

-Collaborative learning using Wikis was given strong approval. "The Internet and Society" was highlighted as a particularly effective course in giving students the ability to upload course materials themselves.

-There was some support but also strong disapproval for grading participation in tutorials: the merits of small written contributions to tutorials were discussed as an alternative.

-Finally, sociology was not in general considered to be "bad" as regards feedback compared to other subject areas, but there was clearly room for improvement.

5. Misc

Do students use the TLA when they encounter difficulties?

No, reps knew of no students who availed themselves of this opportunity.

Do Students feel able to approach staff to seek out clarifications on feedback?

Yes, although it's not always clear who *has* marked some pieces of work.