

Sociology Student Forum
Thursday 5th April 2018
12.30 – 1.30pm

Present: Lisa McCormick, Jon Hearn, Leda Olia, Michaela Springsteen, Caroline Stevens, Katrina Cosentino, Elizabeth Dietz, Karen Dargo (mins)

Dr Lisa McCormick welcomed all to the forum and noted that as the forum was meeting in extraordinary circumstances in the wake of the industrial action, students may have topics other than the usual issues discussed at these meetings. A list of possible topics was listed and students asked to raise any other issues.

1. Lecture Capture

The university is moving towards recording lectures as standard practice and students were asked for their thoughts on this. Students were on the whole not supportive of this move for the following reasons:

- It was felt that recording lectures would fundamentally alter the dynamics of the lecture and the relationship between lecturer and students. The best live lectures are interactive and recording them would reduce this element as there would be issues around consent and students may also be less likely to contribute if they were being recorded.
- Students also felt that live lectures delivered learning outcomes more successfully than a recording could, unless the lecturer is simply reading slides.
- If lectures were recorded there would be an inevitable drop in attendance. Students recognise that there will always be a proportion of students who do not attend all lectures but they also felt that there is a further sizeable proportion who would not attend because they would rely on the recording. Attending lectures fosters community but there is also an educational impact on the students who do attend as they lose out on the contributions of others.

The general feeling is that recorded lectures should not be routine and available to all students but it was acknowledged that there were some students who would benefit from lecture capture, namely, students who suffered from anxiety and depression and found it difficult to attend (however, there was also the view that attending lectures is a positive activity for students who have depression and should be encouraged).

Rather than having recorded lectures available to all students they should only be available to students who have this recognised disability. It might also be preferable to have recorded lectures available for only a short time after the live lecture to further encourage attendance.

There was discussion around whether some students could see lecture capture as an additional form of academic support and the general opinion was that it should not be viewed like this as it did not provide interaction between academics and students. Students should instead utilise existing student support such as SocPals and office hours.

Lecture Capture was also discussed at the recent School Forum and academics expressed concern that it would lead to students feeling more isolated from their cohort, lower attendance numbers and reduce engagement, which in itself could increase anxiety. Dr McCormick advised that Lecture Capture is happening but that many lecturers were concerned that there hadn't been time for a full consultation of students and staff about the policy. Students should evaluate Lecture Capture in practice and feedback their experience through the following avenues:

- EUSA who campaigned for Lecture Capture
- Linda McKie, Head of School (use office hours)
- School Teaching Committees (ask lecturers for contact)

2. Modes of Assessment

Students noted that most honours courses have only two assessments and both are essays. Some students would like to see more assessments and in different formats and felt that this would enhance understanding of the course content. Pre-hons, Sociology 2b was held up as a good example of a course with more assessments – there are three small research exercises that build on each other and culminate in the 40% research proposal. Students enjoyed this structure and felt it kept them engaged. For honours courses, perhaps smaller assessments such as a blog or book review on readings could be added.

Professor Hearn and Dr McCormick acknowledged that modes of assessment could be reviewed but also noted that any changes to course structures would have an effect on administration and marking time that would have to be considered.

3. Adjustments due to strike action

Students were reassured that the impact of the recent industrial action would be taken into account at exam boards. The school is in the process of evaluating the impact of the strike on each course and is aware that some courses will have been disrupted more than others. Exam boards will view marks accordingly and take any action necessary to address.

Doing Survey Research was identified as a course that had been particularly affected and students had been given an assessment on a topic that some students had missed due to the strike. An extra DSR session was scheduled but students were under the impression that the final assignment would be on the survey and so did not ask relevant questions at this session – they are now feeling unprepared for the final assignment. The tutorial held after the assignment was announced was full because students were panicking. Professor Hearn noted that adjustments to the final deadline and further sessions of DSR had been scheduled in acknowledgment of the strike's effects. Students advised that in some stats based courses – a topic might not be taught but students are directed to 'google this'. Professor Hearn advised students to let Alan Marshall, head of Q step programme, know that this happens.

4. Distribution of Marks

Students asked if the distribution of marks was the same for all courses. Could students see a histogram of marks spread for each course to give them an idea of what is considered an

average or good mark? Economics do this and they also provide general feedback on all assignments i.e which questions were answered best and which students had struggled with. Students found this very useful particularly doing first assignments. Could we consider putting general assignment feedback on Learn?

Quantitative Methods give general feedback but appreciate this is more difficult to give for essays, especially if there was a choice of topics.

Dr McCormick noted that some universities do give a distribution of marks and course averages but there was a discussion to be had on whether this leads to increased competition and students comparing themselves with each other and if this was a good thing or bad. Students felt that we could pitch this as a way for students to rate the difficulty of the assignment/topic rather than a competition.

5. Sociology Project

Students asked why this was called a project and not a dissertation. Professor Hearn advised that this was partly historical as the degree used to have a group project and an individual project but it is also because a major part of this work is a report on research so project is more apt than dissertation.

6. General

The discussion returned to forms of assessment, with students asking if it would be possible for the university to increase resources (i.e staff hours) to allow more and varied assessments to be added to courses. Professor Hearn reported that we have a structural problem with the numbers of PG tutors and the fact that there are limits on the number of hours these tutors can work. That our marking process involves work being moderated more than once also adds to staff commitment. While course organisers are open to reviewing the number and type of assessment, in many cases it would not be possible to implement change because it would require such an increase in workload. Dr McCormick drew comparisons with American universities, where the course organiser was able to determine the course assessments required and there was no moderation to consider.

7. AOB

Professor Hearn asked that students contact him directly if they have any issues arising from the industrial action.

Dr McCormick thanked all for taking part in the forum and assured students that although these are difficult times for the university, we will get through them.