

International History Department Student Staff Liaison Committee meeting minutes

Wednesday 7th November 2012

Present:

Justin Lau (BA History year 3, Co-Chair)
Nico Nalbantian (BA History year 3, Co-Chair)
Raphael Bousquet (BSc IR and History year 3)
Maria Coelho (BSc IR and History year 2)
Maryan Osman (BSc IR and History year 2)
Jonathan Jeutner (BSc IR and History year 2)
Alistair Hughes (BA History year 2)
Emma Forth (BA History year 2)
Georgia Derrett (BA History year 2)
Janice Chan (BA History year 1)
Sivakami Sivakumar (BA History year 1)
Jack Kelly (BSc IR and History year 1)
Lodewijk Vriens (BSc IR and History year 1)
Eleonore Lazat (BSc IR and History year 1)
Ani Chen (General Course)

Dr Steve Casey (Deputy Head of Department)
Mathew Betts (UG administrator)

1. Welcome and introduction

The committee members introduced themselves and the Chairs thanked the new first year and General Course reps for volunteering.

2. Cohort feedback

First Year BSc IR and History

- After the initial somewhat overwhelming period of the first few weeks, students are beginning to settle in.
- The various orientation meetings were mostly helpful. Students would have appreciated receiving the entire orientation schedule in one communication, rather than part by part, which confused some students. The venue of the Freshers Fair was considered to be good.
- Students are keen for lecture slides to appear promptly on Moodle after a lecture, particularly for HY116.
- Some students had found some of the HY113 lectures so far a little difficult to follow. There will be the opportunity to provide formal feedback on specific lectures later on in the year via the Teaching Quality and Review Office's class and lecture survey exercise.
The lecture room for HY113 is too small to accommodate all the students on the course, with a surplus of approximately 25 students without seats each week.

Action: Mr Betts to take liaison with Timetabling to try to secure a different room (can be difficult as availability is limited at this time of the academic year).

- Students feel somewhat neglected by the IR department, as even though their home department is IH, it is a joint degree. They would have liked to have been invited to the IR writing group.

First year BA History

- Students are generally happy so far.
- It would have been helpful for new first year students to be able to hear informal views from other students in the second and third years about the courses available for selection. Some student mentors had been present at the departmental induction reception, but they obviously could not meet and speak to everybody. Some students had heard from their student mentors that course advice was not in the remit of their role; those present at the meeting who act as student mentors confirmed that it is fine for mentors to do this, in an informal and balanced way. Many first year students' mentors are not in the International History department, so they would not be able to do this with regard to HY courses, although they could be a good source of information about outside options in other departments which would also be useful.

Action: Mr Betts to post a list of student mentors in the International History department on the Moodle noticeboard.

Second year BSc IR and History

- The majority of the feedback had been positive, relating to both History and IR courses.
- A previously raised issue came up again: students would like to receive feedback on their IR exams, as they do with their History exams. Dr Casey explained that the IH department had initiated this practice but that it was not standard across the School, although the School management look upon it favourably. Mr Betts advised that the IR department had previously said that exam feedback could be made available on specific request by students, and suggested contacting the relevant course convenor in the first instance. The third year BSc IR and History rep also encouraged second years to do this as a way of signalling the demand to the IR department.
- Some IR classes do not start until week three of term, which can make it difficult for students to follow the content of the course. Again it was noted that the IH department does not have any authority over the way the IR department structures teaching, but that the Teaching Quality and Review Office class and lecture survey could be used to raise this issue - which also applies to some third year courses, the 3rd year rep reported.

Second year BA History

- Students are generally satisfied.
- This term there is a bottleneck of essay deadlines in week seven. However it was noted that in general this issue has improved and that class teachers are aware of the situation and some are willing to move deadlines accordingly. The problem will not recur next term as the deadlines are staggered.

- The list of paper 5 (compulsory Early Modern History course) options was felt to be somewhat thin in terms of second year level HY courses. Two options on the list are third year courses and one is an Economic History course.
Dr Casey advised that Dr Paul Stock had been appointed as an Early Modern lecturer last year, and that recruitment for another Early Modern lecturer was underway. There is a time delay involved in seeking the necessary approvals for new courses which means that there will not be a new Early Modern course available by the time of the course choice meeting in Lent term. However, it was proposed that once the new appointment is made the Early Modern faculty should meet to consider the curriculum with a view to seeking approval for a new undergraduate course later this year, to start in 2013/14, which could be advertised to students in the summer term as a late addition.
- For HY235 and HY208, many of the key readings are not available on Moodle. Students understand that in some instances this is intentional in order to ensure that they gain experience of using large research libraries such as those at LSE and Senate House. However, problems arise with courses such as these which have higher numbers of students. There are not enough copies of the key books in the libraries to go around, given that students all need to borrow them at the same time as dictated by the course programme.

Action: BA History year 2 reps to provide Mr Betts with lists of the understocked essential books – will liaise with Dr Best/Professor Sked/LSE Library to try to obtain more copies.

- HY203: students feel that further indication of which reading is essential would be helpful. Dr Casey advised that this can usually be addressed by asking the class teacher in the first instance.
- HY226: Students have found it hard to follow how lectures correspond to classes. The schedule as set out on Moodle is confusing; it may be that some sections are in the wrong order.

Action: Dr Casey to speak with Dr Jones in the first instance.

Third year BSc IR and History

- Students are generally satisfied.
- Particular praise had been offered for the GTAs teaching on HY315 and HY321.

Third year BA History

- There had been some discontent with the class sizes in HY304, even though there are 30 students on the course and two classes of 15 which is within the School's rules. Some students have been switching classes between weeks when not authorised to do so which has affected the class numbers and the experience of others.
Dr Casey reported that Dr Moore would be offering a third class group at a different time of the week, and that if there were sufficient demand from students to move into this group it would go ahead.

- There had been some disappointment about HY320 being suspended early in the term due to lack of registered students. Dr Casey explained that this was unexpected and not in line with demand in previous years. The students who had wished to take it had been offered alternative and exceptional options such as suspension of regulations to take another course they were interested in, and to audit the Masters course on the end of the Cold War. Dr Casey asked students why they thought HY320, which normally had 2 groups, had suddenly lacked for demand. The student consensus was that because HY206 now went to the end of the Cold War, there was far less interest in doing a specialist course that covered the 1980s.
- It was noted that it is difficult to manage class provision and sizes in the first part of Michaelmas term as students do not have to finalise course choices until the end of week four, so problems of this type are inevitable. On discussing this School-wide deadline, the students on the committee did wish to retain the deadline of week 4, and not have it set earlier. It was felt to be useful for new first year students who aren't familiar with LSE teaching, and for students taking courses where class teaching does not commence until week 3 (see above).
- Some of Professor Westad's dissertation students have been having difficulty arranging supervision meetings due to his schedule.

General Course

- Students' main query was on expectations for academic writing at LSE. It was not known whether many of the General Course students had attended the department's study skills session in week one which covered this issue. Dr Casey recommended that students seek advice from their class teachers in office hours, and to consult the student handbook.
- HY315: some students were unsure as to whether the focus of the course was intended to be historical, or on political theory. Dr Casey recommended discussing the course with Dr Hochstrasser in office hours.

3. External examiner reports

The committee received and noted the external examiners reports for the undergraduate programme in 2011/12. These were very positive and pleasing to the committee.

4. Undergraduate Forum representative and deputy representative

Justin Lau volunteered to continue as the UG forum rep, with Nico Nalbantian as deputy. The meeting agreed.

5. iPads

In response to the UG Forum's request to consider the use of iPads as an educational tool, the committee resolved that while a free iPad from the School would be a pleasant gift to receive, as an educational tool it is not essential and money may be better directed elsewhere. The availability of Lecture Capture on iTunes would be a more useful technological offering.

6. Any Other Business

Dr Casey asked for clarification from the committee on some of the points that had come out of the National Student Survey results of 2012, and what students might like to see by way of improvements. Accessibility of staff is not an issue according to the survey results, whereas quality of advice and interaction is a comparatively weaker area.

Suggestions from the student reps included greater teacher guidance on readings, and more social and extra-curricular interaction. Department roundtable debates had previously been convened to meet this wish, but subsequent feedback had shown that undergraduates felt that these events were not aimed at them, when in fact they were.

The committee resolved that a modified form of the roundtable events would be well received by undergraduates. The topics should be more in line with the undergraduate degree curriculum and thus of greater interest, and the events only open to undergraduates so that students did not feel put off by a doctoral thesis level of detail in the discussions.

7. Date of next meeting

The date and time of the next meeting were provisionally set as Wednesday 13th February 2pm, week 5 Lent term.