

International History Department Student Staff Liaison Committee meeting minutes

Wednesday 5th February 2014

Present:

Emma Forth (BA History year 3, Chair)
Maryam Osman (BSc IR and History year 3)
Matteo Lenzi (BSc IR and History year 3)
Sivi Sivakumar (BA History year 2)
Jack Kelly (BSc IR and History year 2)
Lodewijk Vriens (BSc IR and History year 2)
Uday Mehra (BSc IR and History year 2)
Eleonore Lazat (BSc IR and History year 2)
Kathryn Houston-Floyd (BA History year 1)
Catrina Brooker (BA History year 1)
Khanh Nguyen (BSc IR and History year 1)
Yeva Agayan (BSc IR and History year 1)
Kanan Parida (BSc IR and History year 1)
Fazeela Jahangir (BSc IR and History year 1)

Professor Vladislav Zubok (Undergraduate Programme Director)
Mathew Betts (Undergraduate administrator)
Paul Horsler (IH Library liaison)

Apologies:

Orla McNamara (BA History year 1)
Josh Hitchens (BA History year 1)
Lucy Flamm (General Course)

1. Welcome and introduction

The committee members introduced themselves. Papers relating items 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 had been circulated prior to the meeting and copies were also provided at the meeting itself.

Cohort feedback

2. First Year, both programmes

Students questioned whether the feedback they receive for formative essays will be of great benefit to them in preparing for the examinations. Third year students confirmed that this feedback does prove useful in this regard. Most courses also include mock exams in the early summer term, from which students also receive feedback.

Essay deadlines have overlapped this term in HY113 and HY116. This does happen occasionally, but less so now that the number of essays for most courses has been reduced. This particular instance of overlap (113-116) can be looked at for next year.

Signposting of general/overview texts in reading lists would be appreciated. *Best, Hanhimaki et al* was identified as a very useful overview text for HY113 and HY116. Class teachers can be consulted for guidance in this area.

3. Second year, both programmes

Students in the second year are generally happy.

HY208 has had some staffing issues this term, but students are aware of the situation and contingency and catch-up arrangements are being put into place.

4. Third year, both programmes

Students would like more courses on the history of extra-European countries and continents, above all Africa and also possibly a further course on Latin America, because HY239 students are enthused and wish to continue. Mr Betts commented that the provision of courses is linked to recruitment of staff, which is a protracted and resource-linked issue, but these wishes have been noted before and if they are still held students should continue to express them. The department may be taking on more students in future years so potentially further recruitment of staff could follow.

5. General Course

The student rep had sent apologies to the meeting and written feedback was provided after the meeting.

Mainly I just wish to reaffirm the preference for the current structure of classes. As all General Course students are international students reading weeks would not allow students to travel home as many do. Additionally, the 15 student cap is what has drawn many students to study at LSE and smaller classes allow for a preferred, intimate academic experience.

HY226 - The Great War. The library has a plethora of copies of larger texts that summarize the First World War as a whole but many of the weekly assigned readings from the reading list lack copies of books to meet the number of students in the course. This has been especially challenging in the Michaelmas term. Per any given week 30+ students are competing for the 2-3 copies of an assigned book. There are dozens of copies of books that deal with the war as a whole but the weekly assigned texts lack proper numbers to meet the demand of the students. I am happy to draw up a more concrete list of the texts that lack copies if it would help!

Action: Mr Betts to obtain list of books from the student rep and liaise with Mr Horsler to see whether book-student quotas have already been reached in this course or whether more can be purchased.

6. Online Reading Lists system

Students have become more accustomed to the system since the last meeting, but the issues for users around log-in, navigation and the dashboard do persist. Mr Horsler discussed the specifics of some of these with student reps, answering some queries and taking some away for further investigation.

The subscription to the Financial Times is widely appreciated by students. Those who subscribed privately before this was introduced should check with the FT directly what will happen to their private accounts once they graduate and their LSE subscription ends.

7. Proposed reform of the academic year term structure

A full discussion took place, capturing the following key points:

- The potential to introduce reading weeks may sound attractive; however it is likely that courses would introduce more continuous assessment with deadlines straight after the reading week. As the trend unfolds to increase the percentage weighting of these elements of assessment, their word length also increases, making them heavier assignments. This means that students would be likely to focus solely on the piece of summative assessment over the reading week rather than catching up on reading. Some students may also use this as a mid-term 'holiday' rather than a study break.
- International students would prefer the current structure allowing for longer vacations as they can visit their home countries during these periods. Neither added reading weeks nor the associated shorter vacations would allow for this so well.
- The scope to allow departments flexibility with the number and structure of teaching weeks for their own courses could create problems for students taking outside options, or indeed joint degrees, as the various departmental course structures would not necessarily correlate.
- Students do find the current terms intense and demanding, taking account of their studies as well as other commitments such as part-time employment, voluntary and extra-curricular activities and job/internship applications. However, it was felt that a reading week would not offer much realistic respite and that the resulting overall increased length of the terms would be detrimentally tough.
- Some summer internships continue into September and could clash with the beginning of the academic year under the new term structure. There are increasing numbers of internships taking place over the Christmas vacation, which would also be reduced by one week. Although in principle internships should be secondary to academic studies, the reality is that for some careers they are all but essential to securing a job.
- The shorter summer term under the proposed 12-12-6 structure would remove the revision period at the start of this term. Students in all years find this period very useful, if not essential, for success in exams. Third year dissertation students (compulsory for BA History) felt they would be specifically disadvantaged under the proposed system, because they would move straight from finishing their dissertations and submitting them at the start of summer term into sitting exams without adequate time to revise. This is already a stressful period under the current system which would be made unfeasible under the proposed one. It was not felt that the structure of the dissertation course should be altered to fit the term proposal as it works well as it is and produces excellent results.
- Overall, it was the firm consensus of the committee that the existing term structure should be maintained.

8. Teaching Task Force II report

The report was reviewed and a full discussion held, with class sizes and the status of lectures being the two issues receiving the most attention.

Students felt strongly that the maximum class size of fifteen should be maintained for groups taught by all staff in order to safeguard the quality of the student experience. In classes with smaller numbers students feel they receive more and better quality marking and feedback on their work. Office hours are put under pressure when a teacher has many students in her/his class.

BSc IR and History students were concerned that if the IR department increased its class sizes and the IH department did not, this would lead to a two-tier experience for students on this degree.

It was noted that competitors of LSE are downsizing their class sizes.

Lectures offer a good introduction, overview and contextualisation of topics. Students felt that the International History department's model of one-hour lecture plus one-hour class in the first and second years then two-hour seminar in the third year works well as a pedagogical progression. A class immediately following a lecture also works well. Where a 'hybrid' inadvertently emerges, i.e. a two-hour seminar starting with a 'mini-lecture' and leading into a seminar discussion, students get a lot of out of this.

Students felt that the way in which lectures could be 'modernised' was by the inclusion of more multimedia and other technology-supported sources. However, students were not in favour of the use of Personal Response Systems in lectures, see item below.

9. Feedback on Enhanced Course Guides

These were well received by students, who find it useful to see teaching survey results and exam statistics on the documents. The IH department has opted out of publishing exam statistics; students at the committee would like to see them on IH course guides. They did not believe that they would lead to grade inflation because this is not the only reason students choose a particular course.

10. Questions on Personal Response System

Students were familiar with responseware from LSE100. They did not feel that it would be a useful pedagogical tool for History as the nature of debates and issues in the subject does not lend itself to brief, definitive questions and answers that this technology is used for.

11. New course proposal: *Faith, Power and Revolution*

The summative assessment: 2 hour exam 60%, 2000 word report on primary source project 30% and ten minute presentation 10% was well received. Students felt that coverage of relations between European and non-European states/empires/cultures could be increased so that the course is not Eurocentric. It was noted that the course includes various sub-disciplines of History e.g. cultural, social, gender. While this in itself was welcomed students queried whether the course could become too disparate, suggesting as a remedy that the lecturers could give the lectures on their topics consecutively as a block. Mr Betts commented that this course is arranged chronologically and is intended to be a 'survey' course like HY113 and HY116 and so will inevitably be broad. It is intended to act as a 'feeder course' for the more specialist courses offered by the Early Modern historians in the second and third year. However students' comments will be fed back to the department.

12. New course proposal: *Muslim-Jewish relations: History and Memory in the Middle East and Europe*

This course proposal had been previously circulated via e mail to student reps, and endorsed by reply. The meeting formally noted and welcomed the proposal.

13. Thoughts on the idea of a joint History and Law degree

Students were asked for their views on this idea, which is being explored by the IH and Law departments.

Law is not widely taught as a sixth-form subject in the UK or abroad so a joint degree could be well received as it combines Law with History as a subject that students are more likely to have studied before.

In general students felt that the degree would be an attractive prospect, although the intellectual link between the two subjects would need to be clear and coherent throughout the programme.

The Law department would be keen to take students whose interest in Law is academic and not purely vocational. Students questioned that if the degree were not qualifying in Law, why would one not simply take a History degree and then follow the subsequent route to qualification. It was noted that LSE as an institution, and many of its student body, are career-focused so the vocational/qualifying aspect would be important. It was also queried as to whether this degree would detract from the pool of BA History applicants.

14. Report from the Undergraduate Forum representative

Uday Mehra reported that there had also been discussion of the online Reading List system at the forum, and that the idea of a PPE degree at LSE is being considered.

15. National Student Survey results 2012/13

100% of third year BA History students responding to the NSS last year said they were satisfied with their degree. 95% of BSc IR and History students said the same. The department is delighted with these results. Current third year students were urged to complete the NSS online this term.

16. Date of next meeting

The date and time of the next meeting were provisionally set as Wednesday 12th March 3:30pm, week 9 of Lent term. This will count as the summer term meeting, so as to avoid a clash with exam preparation.