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# Teaching Matters

Teaching and Learning Centre

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## TLAC REVIEW SPECIAL Issue 12, July 2003

### In this issue

In the current academic year an internal review team has reviewed six of the School's teaching departments/institutes on behalf of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee. The review team's reports conventionally end with a list of recommendations for the department and for bodies within the School. But the exercise also brings to light much interesting and innovative practice – the stuff of commendation rather than recommendation.

This issue of Teaching Matters draws out a number of examples of interesting practice that caught our attention in this year's reviews. It has been compiled by Liz Barnett (TLC) and Simeon Underwood (TQARO). In case any departments reviewed this year feel left out, there has been no systematic attempt to ensure representation. Nor is there any agenda here, hidden or otherwise, other than celebrating good practice. If we haven't picked up on interesting examples of departmental practice which may well be of interest to other departments, please contact Liz Barnett so they can be included in forthcoming issues.

### Contacts

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### Curriculum reform and development of new courses and programmes

The School's position on course and programme monitoring and review is that this is fundamentally an issue for departments and in particular for the staff directly involved. It is not part of a formalised or central bureaucracy. Given this context, it was heartening to see first the range of approaches being employed and secondly the diversity of new developments and reforms to curricula that have been and are being undertaken across the six departments involved in TLAC reviews this year.

In terms of process, each department has developed its own approach to programme review. In some cases the work has been undertaken by a departmental teaching committee. In others, more informal "teaching focus groups" or "working groups" have been established. Law has a formal timetable of programme reviews that are undertaken by its teaching committee on a rolling basis. All the Media@LSE programmes have only been running

since 1998, with new strands added in the past year. These programmes "are under constant review, as befits their relatively recent establishment" (dept statement p. 7). DESTIN undertakes an annual review of each of its programmes, as well as running a mid-programme review so as to address concerns of the current cohort of students. In its annual reviews it has paid particular attention to its core course (DV400), and is about to engage in systematic review of a second major course (DV406).

Some departments have actively sought external views on proposed developments, including the involvement of external examiners and practitioners, where appropriate.

In terms of curriculum content, the full range of developments is too extensive to report here. Instead, some examples of particular matters which may be of interest to others across the School are summarised below.

The European Institute has been highly successful in refining its specialist niche within the School, at the same time as establishing a more collaborative approach to work with other departments in the 'Politics group'. Notable internal collaborations include the creation of the MSc European Politics which is a joint venture between the European Institute, Government and International Relations, and the MSc in Global Politics, a joint venture between these three departments and DESTIN ie: the entire 'Politics group'.

The Government Department has significantly changed its BSc Government undergraduate programme, in part aimed at strengthening student progression across the three years of the degree programme. International Relations undertook a major review of its BSc IR and a new programme structure will be launched in 2003/4. Both Government and IR have moved to including a third year dissertation in their undergraduate programmes to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop independent study and research skills.

Within the 'Politics group' there is considerable on-going discussion concerning the provision of research methodology teaching on MSc programmes. This is already giving rise to proposals for new approaches to research methods teaching at this level. Other departments may wish to investigate these developments further.

Law is about to launch a new LLM, replacing its involvement in the intercollegiate LLM. The review was a useful device for finding out what the new provision needed to learn from the old.

## Supporting MSc dissertations

Given that dissertations often count for 25% of the overall final grade of most MSc programmes, it is understandable that students tend to have strong views about the support that is provided for this component of their programmes. In the recent TLAC reviews we came across a number of interesting examples of how departments handle dissertation supervision. In the European Institute, there is a clear policy of “front-loading” dissertation preparation. This is signalled to students by a significant increase in tutor office hours, with tutors offering 7-8hrs of “office hours” per week devoted to dissertation meetings early in the Lent term. This is accompanied by an earlier than usual “cut-off” of late May for dissertation supervision, as by then most students will be well set for their independent dissertation work after the examination period.

[Media@LSE](#) also aims for an early start on dissertations, holding a “conference” for MSc students in March. Students are expected to circulate written papers on the progress of their dissertations to their fellow students for comment and feedback before the “conference” session. Unlike the European Institute, however, [Media@LSE](#) provides extended support over the summer period, in the form of “tutorial advisers”. These are PhD students who act as emergency support if students experience problems with their dissertations after the end of the summer term. Feedback from the advisers suggests that they are not heavily used by students, but can be particularly helpful where students face writing blocks, come across unexpected problems in implementing their dissertation thesis plans, or are seeking “technical” advice, for example on style or reference formats at a late stage.

For the first time next year, all LLM students will be expected to write a dissertation. Work is underway in a collaborative project between the Law Department, Library, Teaching and Learning Centre and Centre for Learning Technology to develop a support element for the students on preparing their dissertations, which will include a WebCT site. If the project proves successful, there will be more publicity about it through Teaching Matters!

## Using on-line support for courses

Use of public folders or the web to lodge materials and resources for students is now common practice across departments, with relatively few courses without such support. All six departments that took part in TLAC reviews this year have started to use WebCT to support some of their courses. For the most part, students are enthusiastic about the benefits that such developments can bring – the following comments comparing courses not supported by WebCT with those that were common:

“I spend almost more time looking for books than reading them – all courses should have WebCT electronic readings”

and

“If I could just harness the time to work rather than hunting for material I’d get more out of the other courses.”

Many students appreciate having a “one-stop shop” for their courses, which brings together course materials, reading and other resources (although there were some concerns about subsequent ease and cost of printing on

campus, with some students still preferring printed course packs). Some staff during the reviews expressed concerns that WebCT might be “spoon feeding” students. This issue has been followed up with a detailed article on use of electronic course packs (see issue 11 of Teaching Matters).

Some courses had already gone beyond using WebCT as simple “repositories” for course readings and materials. Students in Law and the European Institute were very enthusiastic about one course that makes very active use of the student discussion area for posting and critiquing presentations. Media students noted an interesting development of having some of their on-line discussion built into their assessment. However the students the review team met felt that use of the discussion area should “be compulsory but not graded”! Media has carefully documented and evaluated its experiences of using WebCT, providing useful insight to others on both process and impact.

Another approach to on-line support that has proved popular in DESTIN is their “Resource Centre” and database, which gives students access to a wide variety of non-book resources, videos, official reports and government documents. The database and the hard-copy Resource Centre are run by students for students. At the start of the academic year, students are asked to volunteer as librarians to check resources in and out of the database for their cohort. The databases have been designed so they are very easy to use, and are searchable by author, title or keyword. DESTIN also has a separate listing of past student dissertations.

## Student handbooks

The development of staff and student programme handbooks is now common across many departments in the School. Several of these handbooks are adapting and developing on an annual basis, in some cases aided by exchange of practice across departments. Some notable elements in handbooks reviewed in the context of the recent round of TLAC reviews include:

- The “Learning Law” booklet which is incorporated into the Law handbooks, along with an exceptionally clear “options handbook” for undergraduates.
- Media have produced a particularly thorough and accessible set of student handbooks.
- DESTIN and Government handbooks provide detailed advice on making oral presentations and essay writing.

## Student induction, diagnostic testing and progress monitoring

DESTIN places particular emphasis on effective induction from before programmes start, putting time and effort into pre-session information along with an extensive induction programme. In addition, it has added a useful structure to tutorial meetings at the end of the Michaelmas term using a mid-programme self assessment reporting form. This document, which is available on public folders, invites students to self-assess their progress on their programme and identify any issues or problems where referral or additional support may be beneficial. There is space on the form for comment from their supervisor, and the completed form is also forwarded to the programme co-ordinator.

International Relations ensures that all students do an early piece of non-assessed written work, used primarily to identify students facing difficulties with working in English and those who are unaware of conventions of writing essays in the LSE context. Media and the European Institute have a similar early piece of diagnostic writing. A helpful observation from students is that they prefer any such work to be directly related to their courses, and to be of a similar format to that required from them for their later assessment, ie: a short essay or answer to an exam-style question rather than a "less typical" piece of writing such as a book review.

Another common area of concern in some departments is students' ability to cope with the more numerical subjects. MSc students in the European Institute were very enthusiastic about the five-week intensive course provided in their programmes in basic economic concepts and the efforts the Institute has made to integrate the economics teaching provided through this course into other courses.

Several departments now offer students the opportunity to do a mock exam, although student views are split as to the most useful timing for such an exercise, and many fail to take up the opportunity - only to wish that they'd followed it through later!

Media pays special attention to the limited number of students it "loses", through the use of an "exit poll" to find out why some students transfer out of programmes, and why some fail to complete.

### **Assessment grading practices**

Several departments have been working on making grading and feedback to students more open and explicit. There have been a number of examples of exercises in achieving greater consistency of standards both for course work and formally assessed work. For example, in the European Institute, particularly on courses where there are a number of lecturers, there is a central filing system of feedback on class presentations and essays which enables staff to cross-check their own standards, as well as giving them access to detailed information on MSc students' progress which can be useful when writing references. DESTIN has recently undertaken a departmental marking exercise amongst all those involved in marking this year's assessments. This showed up some differences in approaches to marking (for example, the extent to which markers penalise students for not answering the precise question set), and led to agreements over the process of first and second marking, and procedures for agreeing final marks where there is a dispute. Media@LSE plans to undertake a similar exercise in the near future.

In the Government Department and International Relations, attention is paid to feedback quality and marking standards of Occasional Teachers by the teachers responsible for undergraduates courses. In Government, there is active moderation of the first set of class essays, and as part of undergraduate tutorials, tutors will often ask students to bring along their marked essays, to discuss with them both the grades they've achieved and the feedback they've been given. International Relations has, on the request of some of its Occasional Teachers, set up a bank of previous essays that they can refer to in order to develop their understanding of grading standards and feedback approaches. Several have commented on the usefulness of this facility.

The Government Department has set up procedures for monitoring assessment outcomes at undergraduate level to diagnose problems which might arise from variation in teaching or assessment. Each year for the last three years, the Departmental Manager has prepared descriptive and comparative statistics drawing on the current and previous two years of results. Particular attention is paid to courses in which students' final assessments lie at the extremes of the distribution and where there might appear to be cause for concern.

Law was the enthusiastic "pilot" department for the on-line class registers that should significantly improve speed of access to class grades and class teacher comments, and enable quicker identification and follow-up by personal tutors of students facing difficulties with their studies.

European Institute students were particularly enthusiastic about the feedback given by one member of staff who provided them with detailed advice on how to upgrade their essay answers (eg: from a "merit" to a "distinction"). The European Institute has a general policy of encouraging students to write very concise pieces of work (1,500-2,000 words only), in part with an eye to writing requirements in likely future careers, in part as good practice for exams.

### **Keeping track of alumni**

Departments are well aware of the benefits of keeping in touch with alumni, not simply to ensure up-to-date information on graduate employment, but also as a resource for current students. DESTIN has a particularly active approach to this, with an alumni network of over 1100 graduates, many of whom can be contacted by current students for advice on research and careers. The database can also prove useful in setting up links for students. The database is maintained by departmental administrative staff who go to considerable lengths to ensure that it is kept up to date.

[Media@LSE](#) also has an active alumni database. Eight of its current PhD students previously completed one of their MSc programmes. These in turn are now (unusually) contributing to the teaching of the existing MSc programmes. Whilst this practice is not encouraged across the School, employment of Occasional Teachers who have previously studied on the courses on which they are teaching can provide an excellent bridge between students and faculty, and an "insider" perspective for the current students.

### **Peer observation of teaching**

It's fair to say that few departments have adopted systematic use of peer observation as part of their strategy either for improving or assuring teaching quality. However, the Government Department maintains its long-running peer observation scheme, and continues to find that as much, if not more, can be learnt from observing colleagues as from receiving feedback from them. In particular, a number of established colleagues have commented on useful lessons they have learnt from seeing how younger colleagues and Occasional Teachers approach their class teaching. The department has recently built on the entirely confidential peer observation scheme by inviting two new members of academic staff to observe a range of classes, and write a brief report on current departmental teaching practices. This should prove a useful resource to new full time and Occasional Teachers in the department.

## Supporting and rewarding occasional teachers

Government and International Relations have both produced Occasional Teacher handbooks, which provide an extremely useful supplement to the central training provision (and to the new Occasional Teacher handbook which will be available from TLC later this summer). Media has benefited from teaching development funding to produce a handbook for Occasional Teachers specifically focused on the teaching of one of its core courses. Media also has a "mentor" for Occasional Teachers drawn from the full time faculty.

Government also actively encourages feedback from Occasional Teachers, with a mid-year feedback session with the convener at which they can raise issues and concerns.

## PhD support

Several departments have been actively engaged in improving provision and support for PhD students. Media PhD students spoke enthusiastically of their "thesis committee" which gives the students a viva (good experience for "the real thing"). This is recorded and the tape then made available to the student.

Work on developing a "community of scholars" within departments is evident in the range of specialist workshops and seminar series now provided for new and continuing PhD students in a number of departments. Some appear to be much more effective than others. Contributing factors include: staff motivation and willingness to attend the

## Teaching prizes for Occasional Teachers

Congratulations to the prize winners for 2002-03 Occasional Teacher awards.

Several of the departments reviewed take part in the annual "teaching prize" scheme for Occasional Teachers promoted by the Teaching and Learning Centre. Both the Government Department and International Relations augment the number of prizes and value of the prizes awarded, all of whom are included in the TLC Teaching Matters "awards" listing, and on the Teaching and Learning website. In addition, in Government, the Convener informs all colleagues of the prize-winners and encourages them to mention the awards when they write references.

Isabella Lepri	Anthropology
Lucia Michelluti	Anthropology
Jonathan Lunn	DESTIN
Karen Throsby	Gender Institute
Elena Lopez-Gunn	Geography & Environment
Stuart Astill	Government
Daniel Linsker	Government
Cameron Lawrence	Information Systems
Valentina Mele	IIM
Konstantinos Tzioumis	IIM
David Easter	International History
Tatyana Chambers	Language Centre
Claudia Geithner	Language Centre
Christophe Millart	Language Centre
Jesse Elvin	Law
Tatiana Flessas	Law
Enrico Milano	Law
Tamara Relis	Law

seminars on a regular basis; having a clear theme and focus to the events; having sufficient students engaged in research in a given area to provide the necessary "critical mass" and having someone prepared to actively manage the seminar series.

The Government Department has developed a website for its PhD students, to give them a more public profile and highlight their skills, interests and availability to employers.

[www.lse.ac.uk/collections/government/whosWho/Research\\_students\\_Research\\_interests.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/government/whosWho/Research_students_Research_interests.htm)

Name	Research interests
Chrysoloras, Nikolaos	Post-Marxist, and post-structuralist political theory, issues of identity formation, and critical political philosophy
Dodds, Anneliese	Comparative social policy; regulation and the welfare state; international trade and welfare institutions; information and education policy; the politics of Scottish devolution
Genoud, Christophe	Regulation theory, Institutional design, Privatisation and liberalisation of network industries, Network Analysis and Delegation Theory.
Glyptis, Leda-Agapi	Nationalism, War and National Identity, Historiography, Revolution.
Hoyland, Bjorn	Legislative behaviour and organisation, in particular in relation to the European Parliament; European Union Politics, institutions and policy-making; Institutional rational choice theory; European Integration.

Stephen Tully	Law
Mark Baltovic	Mathematics
Rahul Savani	Mathematics
Tony Whelan	Mathematics
Ana Langer	Media & Communications
Shani Orgad	Media & Communications
Ruth Kattumuri	Methodology Institute
Philipp Dorstewitz	Philosophy
Antti Saaristo	Philosophy
George Zouros	Philosophy
Vincent Guillin	Philosophy
Shireen Kanji	Social Policy
Roli Asthana	Social Policy
Barry Rogers	Social Psychology
Tomas Chamorro Premuzic	Social Psychology
Amanda Van Eck Duymaer	Sociology
Panagiotis Avramidis	Statistics
Tony Whelan	Statistics
John D'Souza	Statistics

## Staff development advanced notice

### The Cambridge Seminar on External Examining Quality & Practice

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> – Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2003

This Seminar is designed to act as an introduction to external examining for those who are new to it and an opportunity for more experienced external examiners to reflect on the process. Any LSE staff interested in attending should contact Rebecca Trumble ([r.j.trumble@lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.trumble@lse.ac.uk)) for further details.