

## In this issue

In the 2004-5 academic year the internal review team reviewed three of the School's teaching departments/institutes on behalf of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee: International History (IH), Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method (PLSM), and Geography and Environment (G&E). It also reviewed the LSE Teacher Accreditation Programme offered by TLC.

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 Louisa Green (TQARO). Some particularly interesting developments noted in this issue include:

- Splitting the personal tutor role (IH)
- Using a new marking scheme to encourage staff to go over the "72% barrier" (G&E)
- Developing a PhD log book (IH)
- A writing course for MSc students (PLSM)

In case any departments reviewed 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 that may well be of interest to other departments, please contact Liz Barnett so they can be included in forthcoming issues.

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## Curriculum reform and development of new courses and programmes

**International History:** The opening of the Cold War Studies Centre has had an important impact on programmes in the department. This includes the development of a new 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate course that builds on first year work and prepares students for existing and new specialist options in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. A new "end of cold war" course has been added to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year options. PhD students benefit from access to the Cold War Seminar Series. Developments in this area have also had a direct impact on MSc students. To quote a couple of MSc students when asked about how they viewed the Cold War Studies Centre, students responded with statements such as "It's the reason I came" and "It's the reason I stayed".

The Department has strengthened the cultural and intellectual aspects of its undergraduate programmes, and is planning new courses to strengthen the breadth of its geographical reach. At the Masters level, it has introduced changes to the overall structure of its programmes. This has included moving away from obligatory core courses, and has increased student choice within programmes.

**Geography and Environment** has undergone major curriculum reform over the past ten years, such that, at the undergraduate level, only one programme remains from the departmental provision in 1995, and even that has been substantially reviewed. The main thrust of the change has been to focus teaching (and research) on social science aspects of Geography and to move away from general geographical perspectives. The reorganisation created two other main new foci: the development of an emphasis on quantitative economic geography and the creation of a body of expertise and teaching on environmental studies/policy.

The department characterises its programmes as “research-informed” rather than “research-led”, in that curricula are carefully designed with student need in mind, rather than determined purely by the staff research agenda. An external examiner characterised the Department’s teaching as providing “a relatively small range of highly integrated specialist courses often having an economic or environmental or applied dimension as a core”. From the review it is clear that students who apply to the department are fully aware of its distinctiveness, and that this is what attracts them to it.

At the MSc Level there have also been some important developments with two new programmes (MSc Regional Science and MSc Urbanisation and Development) and several MSc’s gaining and/or maintaining ESRC recognition.

**Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method** has replaced its old BA/BSc in Philosophy with a new BSc degree. This is a much more specialised programme, which is now completely separate from the University of London Federal Programme. One impact of this change is decreased student choice. However, the Department is addressing this with the development of new 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year courses in the coming year.

The Department has also developed new MSc courses, launching one in Philosophy and Public Policy last year, and adding two further courses (one on the use and appraisal of scientific method, the other on rational decision-making) this coming session. It is looking at ways of promoting these offerings to other programmes in the School particularly at MSc and PhD levels.

### **Student support and guidance**

#### **Splitting the personal tutor role:**

International History has split the role of the departmental tutor into two separate jobs, as this role has become more complex and time consuming. The split is between responsibility for individual student tutorial and pastoral matters, and responsibility for the undergraduate programme as a whole. The review team was initially curious about

student perceptions on this dual post. However, it is clear that students know who to turn to, and the staff are certainly finding the job more manageable as a shared responsibility.

**Writing for MSc students:** Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method identified a problem for MSc courses of students facing difficulties adapting to writing essays in philosophy, given many come from physical science/engineering backgrounds. The Department has addressed this problem by introducing a non-examined but compulsory course on “Philosophical Writing” for MSc programmes. Whilst the course is not universally popular with students, it has achieved the desired results of significantly reducing the negative tail of under-achievement on the MSc dissertation. This course also provides a potential vehicle for addressing plagiarism issues (another matter that the Department is starting to grapple with).

**Keeping students informed:** Of all the departments in the LSE, International History is perhaps the best example of providing clear and accessible information on many aspects of study to its students. TLC often points to IH documents as examples of good practice for others to build upon. Many of these are openly accessible in public folders. See, for example, in the IH Departmental Undergraduate Handbook folder:

- The Undergraduate Grading Scheme (which provides students with a helpful chart converting letter, number and percentage grades into degree classifications)
- Writing English: a style sheet (Professor McGregor Knox’s 2003 excellent guide for students on grammar and punctuation)
- “Gobbets” exercises and how to tackle them (an excellent example of a guidance note for students on a particular form of assessment).

### **Student assessment issues**

**Increasing diversity of assessment:** In G&E, twenty of the twenty-two undergraduate courses offered last year included assessment other than standard

examinations. PLSM has introduced its first course project into a 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate course: Philosophy of the Social Sciences. While keeping summative assessment innovation within the boundaries of closed exams, IH has introduced different types of exercise, including review essays and gobbet or document review exercises.

A further IH adaptation was to reduce the number of exam questions to be answered from four to three on undergraduate papers. This has taken away the “advantage” of those students simply able to write faster than others, and has lead to an obvious improvement in the quality of answers students are able to produce.

Meanwhile, G&E have started to explore whether staggering of MSc course assessment deadlines can bring about improved results, and believe they are starting to see this.

**Using marking criteria to reinforce curricula aims:** Historiography is considered to be a key component of undergraduate history programmes, as indicated in the national subject benchmark statement. At LSE, the main historiography course does not happen until students are in the third year. Yet throughout their undergraduate programme, students recognise its importance. An important device that signals its importance, and which staff build upon, is the essay feedback form used by all class teachers. When questioned about historiography, undergraduates noted that it was addressed continuously from the first year, embedded within courses, and brought out clearly in the assessment and feedback on essays.

**Going over the “72%” barrier:** A matter often raised by external examiners is the tendency for departments to use a relatively narrow range of the overall marking frame (with few assessors being prepared to award grades much over 70%). In the reviews, both G&E and PLSM have been grappling with this issue. G&E has introduced the so-called “Cambridge-Durham” scheme of grading on a four-year trial basis. The grading scheme sets out three “levels” within each classification, and sets a percentage grade

against them. The scheme encourages markers to reward exceptional work and mark down low quality work in an appropriate manner. Results look promising, with the spread of marks increasing considerably. PLSM has also produced detailed written criteria and found that this has also helped to spread the grades.

### **PhD issues**

**The 1<sup>st</sup> year:** Philosophy has perhaps the most extensive course requirements for 1<sup>st</sup> yr PhD students of any department in the School. Feedback from the PhD students indicates however that they appreciate what they are expected to do – in that it provides a useful transition from earlier studies in other subjects and provides them with a useful breadth of study alongside the detailed focus of the PhD. The Department actively encourages its students to think about their future careers, and encourages breadth as well as depth of study at the PhD level.

**PhD logbooks:** Many LSE departments have been grappling with ways of keeping a better handle on the progress of PhD students. Elsewhere, there have been various examples of elaborate student logs and use of “personal development plans”. Interested colleagues may wish to contact TLC to see some examples, such as the UCL, Edinburgh and OU products. However, many of these appear somewhat over- elaborate, and may well have some serious costs as well as benefits. IH has now developed its own version of the PhD student log. This is relatively simple and brief. It puts responsibility for maintaining the log on the student. G&E has also developed a logbook that it will use for the first time in 2005/6. Further details on the progress of this initiative will be featured in later issues of Teaching Matters.

Related to the above, it is worth noting that TLC is involved in a joint project with Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, Kings and Edinburgh that is looking at PhD log developments.

**Getting PhD students involved:** The Philosophy PhD programme has various examples of student-initiated/run initiatives, including a student seminar group and

reading group. A direct outcome from student comments and enthusiasm in the review was support from Careers for PhD career development workshops and a small grant from TLC for development of a guide for PhD students on applying for academic jobs in philosophy, the first draft of which is already completed. IH encourages PhD students to increase their internal and external visibility through preparing their own web pages.

### Supporting graduate teachers

A new feature of the 2004/5 reviews was the inclusion of special meetings with graduate teachers (separate from meeting with PhD students). This raised a number of interesting issues, as well as highlighting the value GTAs place on active mentoring and support from within their departments.

PLSM runs a departmental induction for GTAs and undertakes teaching observation of new class teachers. PhD students are encouraged to develop a teaching portfolio and supervisors are expected to help them with this. The department also supplements the central "teaching prize" scheme as it believes that "Fostering professional pride in teaching is.... as important as having formal quality control systems".

G&E is planning to introduce teaching observation (adapting an observation schedule currently used in Economics), and

monitoring of feedback and grading by class teachers of student formative assessment work. It has recently produced a handbook for GTAs.

### Forthcoming reviews

The 2005/6 review schedule is more or less set:  
 Mathematics 26/27<sup>th</sup> January  
 Sociology 23/24<sup>th</sup> February  
 Social Policy 2/3<sup>rd</sup> March  
 Statistics 9/10<sup>th</sup> March  
 Media and Communications 16/17<sup>th</sup> March

### TLC Developments

TLC was also reviewed by TLAC, which considered the unit's "Teacher Accreditation Programme". Soon after the review, TLC submitted a revised version of the programme to GSSC as a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. The programme was accepted, and has had its first intake. Over 30 PhD students have already registered for the programme, and submitted their initial assignments

This newsletter is available in electronic format and, on request, in alternative formats. Please contact the TLC Administrator ([tlc@lse.ac.uk](mailto:tlc@lse.ac.uk)).

## Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office Contacts

The TLAC reviews are run by TQARO. The officer responsible for them is Louisa Green. She is supported by Debbie Heath, who undertakes most of the logistical work, and Caroline Wilson, who has put the statistical data used for the reviews into an altogether more authoritative footing.

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