

# What do History students want? Student engagement at Loughborough University Marcus Collins



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## Aims

- To understand what students expect, experience and desire from a History degree programme
- To assess the practicality and value of student input into curriculum design

## Background

- Loughborough's joint-honours History programme is just two years old
- It has won several awards and grants for its teaching innovations, particularly in the field of e-learning

## Rationale

- From the outset, students were consulted about the programme to an unusual extent through electronic voting, questionnaires, interviews and reflective essays in addition to the customary module feedback forms
- But students are capable of doing more than merely reacting to questions about staff-led initiatives
- The logical next step would be to see what ideas emerged in student-led discussions

## Student Researchers

- Two undergraduates, Jola Groves and Alice Hughes, were selected as student researchers on the basis of their interests, commitment, interpersonal skills and academic ability
- The PI offered them guidance and support, but encouraged them to operate as independently as possible within their brief
- The student researchers devised questions which wouldn't have occurred to staff, and received exceptionally candid answers from their fellow students

## Methods

The student researchers

- conducted a survey among all joint-honours students (N=69) asking them to reply to the question 'If I could change one thing about the History programme I would...'
- issued questionnaires to all first-years (N=54) and to all those taking one second-year module (N=18)
- ran three focus groups with paid volunteers: two with first-years (N=13) and one with second-years (N=6)



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The student researchers devised six key questions for focus groups in response to the survey and questionnaires

### Q1: What are your favourite modules, and why?

- Students showed an overwhelming preference in their first year for survey modules (Modern Europe and Modern World) over those teaching skills and methods (What is History? and Introduction to Academic Studies), as shown on the pie charts to the right
- Since these modules were taught by the same staff, this difference can be attributed to content rather than delivery
- But they felt they were insufficiently coached in the skills needed to succeed at university, especially when compared to their sixth-form training
- Proposal** To revamp the first-year skills module and replace the historiography one with a survey course

### Q2: What would make the course more interesting?

- Students stressed the importance of lecturers conveying enthusiasm for and commitment to their subject, in line with the findings of Alan Booth's HEA-funded History Passion Project
- Their interest in a subject was enhanced by a visceral engagement with the past in the form of visits and talks by eyewitnesses to events they were studying
- They wanted a large degree of choice in their studies from the second semester of their degree course
- Proposal** The introduction of history trips and guest speakers into modules where practicable

### Q3: Is modern technology an asset to learning?

- Students strongly approved of the programme's trademark e-learning techniques
- They were especially enthusiastic about lecture capture and in-class voting using clickers
- A separate research project is assessing other e-learning initiatives by History staff, including the use of Facebook, texting, pre-recorded lectures and 'exam hotlines'
- Proposal** Clickers and Echo360 video capture should be introduced into as many lecture classes as possible

### Q4: How can the assessment and feedback be improved?

- Although tutors believed that they used a wide variety of assessments, some students perceived themselves as having to write 'essay, essay, essay'
- Audio and video feedback from lecturers was generally well-received, but two-thirds of students declared face-to-face tutorials to be their favourite feedback method
- Students viewed group assignments as trouble-some and unfair due to shirking and absenteeism
- Proposal** To allow students to choose their own groups for collaborative projects as friends were thought less likely to let each other down

### Q5: What are your views on class participation?

- The higher class sizes and lower contact hours at university meant that students felt that they participated less than at sixth-form. One viewed university teaching as 'a lot more of them just talking straight at you'
- At the same time, many felt intimidated by the prospect of speaking in seminars or attending office hours. What tutors perceived as apathy is often inhibition
- Electronic voting in lectures with 'clickers' is so popular because it allows anonymous participation in an otherwise didactic teaching format
- Proposal** To supplement open office hours with scheduled meetings between a tutor and half a dozen students (the group size in which they feel most comfortable)

### Q6: Would you still study History with tuition fees at £9,000?

- Only one student expressed general dissatisfaction with the degree programme in the questionnaires
- But just a single student in the focus groups unequivocally declared himself willing to pay £9000 tuition for the programme – and he mentioned that he received a bursary
- So are even popular humanities degree programmes at highly ranked universities in peril?
- Proposal** More contact hours, more resources such as a common room, more emphasis on employability and more memorable experiences *might* convince them that they're getting 'value for money'



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Alan and Jeanne Booth's History Passion Project



Echo360 Presentation and 'Clicker' Question

## Implementation

- Full consideration of how (and how far) to implement students' ideas will follow a staff-student forum and a staff away-day
- Yet staff have already decided to:
  1. Increase the number of lectures for one first-year core course, Modern World History
  2. Launch a further student engagement project in which seven students will design dissertation workshops for themselves and their classmates in 2011-12

## Dilemmas

- Apathetic students are hard to read and still harder to reach. Focus groups require volunteers and questionnaires reach only those who attend class. How do we engage the disengaged?
- Some staff have expressed scepticism about the project on the grounds that students don't really know what they want or – crucially – what they need. Do they have a point?

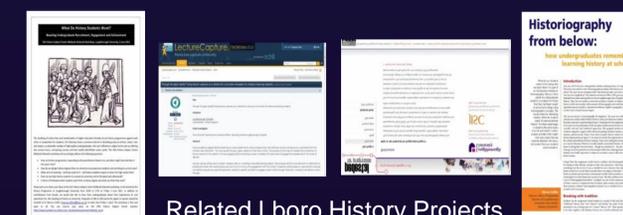
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2 student researchers ask 72 undergraduates to return their verdict and suggest some reforms



The result? A major rethink of an award-winning programme.



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For information, contact [marcus.collins@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:marcus.collins@lboro.ac.uk)

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