

What do our Students Really Think?

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There is much talk in the higher education sector about 'the student learning experience'; but it can be difficult to obtain a true picture of the nature of these 'experiences'. Departmental staff-student committees do their best in this regard, but the insights they provide - although often useful - are inevitably partial (being dependent upon the representativeness of its membership, limitations of remit or agenda, etc.); and the National Student Survey also often cannot provide the specific information that would be truly useful in our teaching.

In response to these considerations, the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies organised a two-day student workshop, which took place in autumn 2006, to gather more detailed feedback on students' perceptions of their degree studies. The intention was to create an opportunity for students to reflect on and share their experiences in a neutral environment (away from their home departments), and in more depth than might otherwise be feasible during the course of their studies. It was also hoped that additional insights might be gained from comparing experiences with students from other degree courses and institutions.

Eleven students attended the event, from a range of backgrounds:

- Level of study: undergraduate levels two and three
- Subject(s) of study: philosophy, theology, religious studies; single and joint honours
- Institution: nine different institutions represented; from older collegiate universities to newer HE colleges; and various regions of the UK

The group also included mature students and those with 'specific learning difficulties' (for example dyslexia).

During the course of the two-day event, students participated in a range of structured workshops and discussions to encourage feedback on different aspects of their experience of studying philosophy, theology and/or religious studies at degree level. The outcomes of these discussions were recorded, so that we could gain more insight into our students' 'learning experiences' and share this with other departments, and so that this information could in turn be used to inform and enhance future curriculum developments.

Activities and outcomes: day one

The discussion on the first day centred on the ways in which students felt A-levels prepared them for study at university, any changes they would like to make to secondary education, the specific benefits they believe they receive from studying their subjects, and how they think their degree is preparing them for working life.

In what ways did your A levels (or equivalent) prepare or not prepare you for your first year at university?

Students discussed this in pairs, writing up their thoughts on flipchart paper. The majority of students had come through the English system, and so had studied A-levels. One student had taken Highers in the Scottish system, and one student had entered HE via an Access course.

Positives

All the students, no matter which route they had followed into HE, felt that studying an 'essay subject' such as English or history was very important preparation for their degrees. In particular, the extended essays at A2 level had helped to prepare them for the kind of independent work required at degree level, and this thought was echoed by the student who took Highers. Extended essays, personal research projects, supervised essays and so on, were all thought to provide valuable experience for university, no matter which entry route they were used in.

In terms of specific courses, it was felt that the English A-level fed directly into what some students learnt in their first year of New and Old Testament studies, and that parts of the RS A-level fed into the RS degree quite well. English was also noted as being a useful introduction to the kind of textual analysis required at degree level. Some students had taken philosophy A-level, or taken modules in philosophy of religion as part of their RS A-level, and they felt that these courses provided a very good introduction to the subjects. The Access course, although very intense, meant that good time management skills were developed, which proved very useful at university.

In general, the students were positive about the commitment and expertise of their teachers, feeling that they were usually working within their specialised areas, and so were supportive and inspiring. They were also positive about the responsibility they felt in making their A-level, Higher or Access choices, and how this prepared them for the kinds of module choices they were offered in their first year at university.

Negatives

Several students noted that neither the RS nor philosophy of religion and ethics A-levels fed in well to their theology degree. In particular there was the expectation that having studied these topics at A-level the students would be well prepared for the topics covered at university, but this was not the case. It was also felt that those studying theology who are not Christian, or have not had a Christian upbringing, were at a distinct disadvantage.

The student who took the Access course felt that she had to do extensive reading of extra texts in order to catch up with students who had taken A-levels. She also struggled with the kind of essay structure required at degree level, as well as getting used to compiling bibliographies in the necessary format.

Some students who took philosophy A-level felt that there was a large overlap between that course and their first year at university, and this caused obvious frustration. There were also some complaints that the A2 level philosophy course lacked structure. Several students voiced concern that their schools did not have specialist teachers, and so English or history teachers were drafted in to teach philosophy classes, which were not really within their area of expertise.

In general, while A-levels were considered good introductions, they were thought to prepare you more for answering the exam paper than developing excellence in the subject. Several students noted that much of their enjoyment and success had been reliant on the teacher they had, and that some teachers used the same teaching methods at A-level as for younger students, which was not appropriate, especially in terms of preparing them for university. The difference in essay-writing style at A-level and university was mentioned, and the fact that A-levels can give you a misleading over-confidence regarding your competence in the subject. The amount of spoon feeding on the Access course (for example being able to hand in multiple drafts of essays for corrections) was not good preparation for university, where students are expected to be a lot more self-sufficient.

Imagine that you are the Education Minister. What changes would you make to secondary education in order to improve transition from secondary to tertiary education?

Students worked in four groups and wrote their answers on flipchart paper.

Group 1

This group thought that there should be greater choice at secondary level, including the restoration of the classics (Latin, ancient Greek, ancient History, philosophy). They thought there should be no overlap between secondary and tertiary education, and a blurring of the gap between the teaching styles of the two. There should be more communication between schools, exam boards and HE Institutions, which should lead to a more consistent experience for students. They believed there should be no 'box-ticking' at A-level, and that students should be taught the subject, not just how to pass the exam. In regards to exams, there should be more continuous assessment, and less emphasis on final exams.

Group 2

The students in the second group focussed specifically on philosophy, and decided that as good debating skills are essential to both tertiary level philosophy and to life, these should be taught at secondary level. They thought that at least 10% of Highers/A-levels and first year university assessment should be discussion based (in addition to exams and essays) to recognise the dialectic nature of philosophy. As part of this, secondary teachers should promote the spirit of philosophy by encouraging debate rather than simply presenting information about a subject.

Group 3

This group believed there should be an emphasis on languages, including grammar and spelling, a greater effort made in identifying dyslexia, and that a GCSE in a foreign language should be compulsory. They thought there should be more consistency throughout the secondary education system in terms of course structure, core subjects taught up to GCSE level, and the requirements of different exam boards. In a similar vein, the group wanted to eliminate the repetition of certain subjects, such as studying World War 2 at three different points in secondary education. They also thought that more secondary level students should be given the opportunity to experience university so that they could decide whether it was for them or not.

Group 4

This group thought that philosophy should be more widely available at A-level, and that there should be free choice modules in English and History so that students could read philosophy elsewhere as well. They thought that weekly textual analysis classes would benefit students of all subjects, and that there should be blind-marking of essays. Subject specific staff were thought to be essential, or the subject should not be offered, and teachers should be jointly responsible for courses in order to minimise any potential problems arising from personality clashes. There should be an emphasis on communication skills, and more formal teaching of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, as well as time spent on essay construction and how to use footnotes and bibliographies.

In general, all the students thought that there should be more consistency between what they were taught in different years of secondary education, and between what they were taught at secondary and tertiary levels. They thought there should be better communication between secondary education and higher education, and between different universities, so a degree in Philosophy/TRS from one institution would be comparable to that of another institution. They also agreed that secondary level students should all be given a 'taste' of university. They all questioned the need for multiple exam boards, and were sceptical about whether there should be faith schools at all.

Imagine that you have been hired by your university to recruit new students in your discipline. Make a poster or leaflet that would advertise the benefits of doing a degree in your subject. Students worked in groups of two or three and produced posters.

Group 1

This group thought that the personal benefit of studying philosophy could be used to recruit students, such as the way philosophy strengthens beliefs, tests beliefs and improves ones intuitions. They also thought that studying philosophy strengthens critical thinking skills, opens ones mind to wider world issues, and gives an opportunity to meet like-minded people. The final selling point they came up with was that studying philosophy will help one to win most arguments.

Group 2

The second group stressed the skills one acquires by studying philosophy, such as debating, strong problem solving skills, textual analysis, reasoning, independent thought, argument evaluation, writing skills and how to research and use sources. They linked these skills to potential careers such as law and politics, emphasising how philosophy can provide a strong skill base. They also gave examples of the kinds of questions philosophy students might look at.

Group 3

This group highlighted the different areas of philosophy students might study, and examples of the sorts of questions discussed. For example, in philosophy of mind and epistemology, 'am I in the Matrix?' and 'what is knowledge?',

under the heading of values, 'what is beauty?' and 'am I a bad person?', and in logic and language, 'can I P and not-P at the same time?'. They also gave examples of former philosophy students, such as Ricky Gervais and Matt Groening.

Group 4

This group contained all the TRS students, and they also emphasised the kinds of transferable skills gained, for example people skills, analysis, writing, awareness of others' cultures etc. They pointed out that TRS incorporates many other disciplines, for example, history, art, languages, which means there is an opportunity for change in second / third year. They suggested a TRS degree is an opportunity to develop one's own religious beliefs and opinions, and can give a theoretical background to one's faith. Another selling point they listed was that rather than just classroom based learning, and writing essays, TRS gives students an opportunity to get out into the community, look at how religions work in everyday life, and meet a diverse range of people. Finally, as TRS is usually a smaller course than other humanities subjects, they pointed out that there may be more access to resources and smaller class sizes.

In general, nearly all the students commented on the kinds of skills their degrees were developing in them, and how these would be beneficial in getting a job after university. Which leads nicely on to the final question they discussed on the first day...

What kind of skills do you think your degree is developing in you?

Students discussed this question in small groups, writing their answers on flipchart paper. When they had shared their thoughts with the group they were shown a draft version of the PRS Subject Centre's employability guide for philosophy students (now published at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications>, hard copy available upon request), and looked at how closely their skill lists matched up with the kinds of skills employers say they require.

Philosophy skills

The philosophy students identified the following as skills they felt their degree was developing in them:

- Problem solving / mental dexterity?deducing the best solutions to a variety of problems
- Debating
- Reasoning
- Independent thought
- Evaluation skills
- Self-discipline
- Valid argument identification
- Textual analysis
- Theoretical groundwork for approaching ethical dilemmas
- Research?good research skills; find relevant information, sourcing
- Writing and expression skills
- Practice in viewing N objectively
- Listening skills (from tutorials, etc.)
- Critical thinking?analysing, evaluating, reflecting
- Creativity?thinking 'out of the box'
- Communication?being able to coherently express yourself, oral and written communication

- Dedication and passion by studying a non-vocational subject?not a means to an end, an end in itself
- Ability to work effectively independently and with others?interact with others
- Concise, rational communication of ideas to employers, to audiences, between peers (leading to) leadership
- Open mindedness
- Keen intuition
- Engagement with very complicated texts and ideas
- Independence of informed opinion
- Autonomy

TRS skills

The TRS students also came up with a long list of skills they thought would be useful in later life:

- Analytical?thought process
- Public speaking?communication
- Time management
- Writing skills
- Reading skills
- IT skills
- Debating skills
- People skills?socialising
- Ability to see issues from another perspective?understanding alternative cultures, lifestyles etc.
- Independence skills / social skills, for example money management, life experience
- Research skills / library skills
- Communication skills?presenting and articulating opinions in spoken and written media
- Self-discipline due to low contact time
- Research ability?being selective, and time management
- Critical thinking
- Comprehension of detailed texts
- Processing information
- Thinking around a problem (outside the box)
- Linguistic and analytical skills
- Broad knowledge base

Activities and outcomes: day two

The second day's discussions focused on students' actual experiences of degree level study, and the degree of fit between this and what they might have expected or hoped for. A concluding roundtable session also gave students the opportunity to debate wider issues regarding the impact of recent government policies on UK higher education.

How has your course met or failed to meet your expectations?

Students discussed this question in discipline-specific groups.

Theology and religious studies

Students were generally very positive about the level of support available from staff; most indicated that this had met, or even exceeded, their expectations. This came with some reservations, however, regarding the perceived approachability of staff, and other support concerns (for example the availability of course materials, and opportunities for structured extracurricular study).

Students also expected, and experienced, a good sense of community within their department. They valued highly the varied nature of their degree studies, exploring a range of perspectives and approaches (including the opportunity to study languages).

Failures to live up to students' expectations were largely identified as being due to communication problems. In some cases, it was felt that the university or departmental prospectus had been unclear (or even misleading) about the options available and the course requirements—for example, regarding compulsory modules. (However at least one student said that s/he enjoyed those courses s/he had not expected or intended to take!). Concerns were also raised by joint honours students about the lack of communication between their respective home departments.

Philosophy

Students were positive about their courses overall as meeting their expectations of being interesting and enjoyable. Some particularly appreciated their department's approach to seminars, which gave an opportunity for student presentations. Another highlight was the opportunity to express and explore one's own opinions; however, students' experiences in this regard were more diverse—some found that they had been given a great deal of scope for individual/original thought, whereas others felt that their department's approach placed much heavier emphasis on understanding and interpreting the philosophical canon, and even discouraged exploration of ideas beyond this.

This diversity of opinion/experience was also reflected in the extent to which students felt they were adequately challenged by their first year of study—some concern was expressed that there was excessive repetition of material covered at A-level (for example). Finally, some students expressed disquiet at the perceived lack of priority given to undergraduate teaching within the department—it was felt that staff attention was focused on their research rather than their students' needs.

What advice would you give to someone who was thinking of doing a degree in your subject area?

This question was also discussed in discipline-specific groups, and gave students an opportunity to draw out some recommendations from the earlier discussions—for example, ways to ensure that expectations are realistic; and also reasons for studying your subject (from day one). Much of the advice proffered was common to all discipline areas.

Many of the students' recommendations were aimed at equipping potential students to make a well-informed choice:

- Do some preparatory reading in your subject. Do you find it interesting and/or difficult?
- If you're not sure about your subject choice: have you considered studying for a joint honours degree?
- Find out about the department to which you're thinking of applying. What areas of philosophy, theology and/or religious studies do they specialise in? (Look at module descriptions, lecturers' backgrounds and publications.) Are these the kind of topics you want to study?
- Go to open days, and ask questions (you're the customer!) If possible, meet the staff, and the students. Find out whether there's a philosophy, theology and/or religious studies society.

- Think about your career aspirations, and how your degree choice will contribute to this ? it's a big commitment (time and money).

Students also emphasised that departments should ensure they provide good information about the subject, as parents and teachers of prospective students may not have a good understanding of what a degree in philosophy / theology / religious studies can offer. It was suggested that it is a good idea to include up-to-date information on departmental activities and a student perspective (for example providing information on undergraduate societies in departments), as the university prospectus can otherwise sound quite bland.

Additional advice focused on enabling future students to know what to expect of their university studies, and how to make the most of their degree:

- Get used to debating, discussing, arguing in seminars (possibly also as part of your assessment).
- Make the most of your first year?read around your subject (not just the core texts), prepare for your future years of study (and start thinking about careers).
- Make good use of your personal tutor?if you want support, ask for it.
- Ask questions, and get to know your lecturers.
- Use personal development planning.

The ideal and the 'typical' lecturer and student

In a more light-hearted exercise, students were challenged to create a portrait of their ideal lecturer, and to compare this with their own experiences. The group was then asked to undertake the same exercise in identifying the characteristics of an ideal / typical student.

Qualities of an ideal lecturer

Students emphasised the importance of staff being knowledgeable, upto- date, and passionate about their subject. Many other key features centred around the nature of staff-student interactions?students felt it to be important that lecturers were clear, concise, engaging and inspiring in class, using a variety of material; and that staff were generally friendly and approachable.

Students also drew attention to the fact that some of their lecturers fit this description! One described his/her tutor as someone who 'shows me the world, and guides me to where I'm trying to go with my ideas'. They also emphasised the helpfulness and approachability of many staff. However, it was felt that not all staff were approachable, and not all engaged equally well with their students?some students felt that their tutors 'don't really listen'.

Qualities of an ideal student

Discussions focused mostly on the attributes of a successful student? for instance, commitment to one's studies and subject area, good time management, effective preparation, engaging well with academic staff. However, some students raised broader considerations - for example, emphasising the value of a diverse student population, which includes a variety of perspectives (gender, faith, ethnicity, age etc.).

Again, it was pointed out that some students do actually mirror the ideal; however, it was also acknowledged that many are distracted by other aspects of university life?the two most common culprits cited being the social life; and money worries.

Policy debate: Do you think the introduction of fees might change higher education or the student experience? Should 50% of 18-30 year olds go to university?

The students in our group were agreed that the introduction of fees would, in the short term, be likely to dissuade many from applying to university; however, many also thought that in the longer term people would come to accept the need to pay fees. They also noted that, if fees prompt many would-be students to 'think twice' about studying at university, this could be of benefit?for instance, such students would be likely to take more responsibility for their education.

The students demonstrated a great deal of optimism that the income from fees would improve the quality of higher education, leading to better resources and staff: student ratios; and ultimately helping to make UK higher education more competitive internationally.

However, there was a significant degree of concern about the potential for fees to change the profile of the student population. A number of students suggested that the introduction of fees would undermine efforts to widen participation, as lower income families tend to be more debt-averse. Others noted that students from middle-income families were likely to be affected, as they would be less likely to qualify for financial support. Many of the students also expressed concerns that future applicants would be deterred from applying to read subjects such as philosophy, theology and religious studies, in favour of more vocational courses leading to a clearer career path (and financial return on their investment in higher education). It was further noted that these considerations raise wider (unresolved) questions about the role of higher education, and indeed whether it should be government funded.

The merits of the government's ambition that 50% of 18-30 year olds should attend university were also vigorously debated. Students welcomed the aspiration to foster a culture of learning, but were concerned that the effects of this policy might in fact undermine this aim; by making progression to higher education 'the done thing', rather than attracting students who are genuinely dedicated and have a clear understanding of how higher education will benefit them. Fears were expressed that increasing participation would devalue degrees, and also the skills of non-graduates: it was suggested that the employment prospects of skilled non-graduates are already being damaged by the increasing number of graduates entering the employment market. Students also argued that it is increasingly unclear what counts as a 'graduate level' job; and questioned whether the skills needed by employers are necessarily always those provided by higher education, or whether more diverse education and training routes should be encouraged.

Concluding reflections

In many respects, the perceptions and experiences reported by our sample group of students perhaps do not require us radically to re-think our understanding of 'the student learning experience' in philosophy, theology and religious studies. However, it is instructive to obtain a sense of what our students themselves consider to be the key areas of strength - and of concern - in the study of our disciplines.

We have been reminded, for example, that our students often are effective ambassadors for our subjects. They recognise the distinctive value of their degree studies, and are keen to share this with others. Do we always make the best use of their enthusiasm, involving them in ,for example, departmental recruitment?

It is also clear from these reflections that students acknowledge - indeed, often welcome - responsibility for their own learning; however, they often feel that their experience of secondary education leaves them ill-equipped to respond adequately to this challenge. Many staff and departments are now working to provide more structured support for first year students to ease this transition to degree level study, (see Deirdre Burke's article in this edition of Discourse, 'Engaging Students in Personal Development Planning') and we need to ensure that these are readily accessible to

our students.

Indeed, many of the concerns raised by the students in this group seem to cluster around, and/or arise from, issues of staff-student communication. We aim to foster independence of thought amongst our students, and yet at least some of these students voiced concern about expressing 'unacceptable' views, and seemed to be exercising conservative self-censorship in their work. Some students also felt illinformed about course details and departmental practices, and that they could not approach staff to discuss problems or concerns. Improved communication might also help to avert (or at least to minimise) many of the perceived gaps between students' expectations and their experiences.

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