SPS UG STUDENT FORUM
Chrystal Macmillan Conference Room 2.15, Floor 2
WEDNESDAY 8th FEBRUARY 2023

MINUTES

STUDENT REPS:

Sophie Burbank – Government, Policy and Society with Quantitative Methods (4th year)

Casey Chu – Politics (2nd year)

Polina Vekchina – Social Anthropology and Politics (2nd year)

Emil Casimir Conway – Linguistics and Social Anthropology (4th year)

Aspen Kissinger Sociology (3rd year)

Yara Share – Sustainable Development Sociology (3rd year)

Luisa Langmann – Sustainable Development (4th year)

Zohra O'Doherty - EUSA representative for UG students in SPS)

SPS STAFF:

Gerhard Anders - Director of Student Experience and Engagement

Richard Baxstrom - Deputy Head of School and Director of Learning and Teaching

Andrea Birdsall - Director of Undergraduate Degree Programmes **(Chair)**

Marie Craft - Head of Teaching and Student Services

John Harries - Senior Lecturer and Director of Undergraduate Teaching in Social Anthropology

Sue Renton - Student Experience Officer

Student Support Assistant – Rebecca Lewis

Apologies: Catriona Elder - Head of Student Support and Enhancement

1. **Welcome**

   Andrea gave a precise and clear introduction of the purpose of the meeting, and all in attendance introduced themselves.

2. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

   Minutes deemed accurate. Gerhard confirmed that the following points raised from the last meeting had been actioned:

   - Timetabling issues were fed back to the Timetabling Team
   - Implementation of new Student Support Model is now in place and a Wellbeing Adviser is also located within the School.
   - The Student Development Office (SDO) has now expanded and is happy to provide guidance and support for student-led initiatives.
   - PTs were encouraged to reach out to students who started their studies during the pandemic, in particular Year 2, and feedback will be gathered to see if this was followed through.

3. Experiential learning as part of the Curriculum Transformation Project

John Harries - Senior Lecturer and Director of Undergraduate Teaching in Social Anthropology

JH outlined the new Experiential Learning (EL) model proposal. The University is in the midst of a curriculum transformation project, with a recommendation to enhance experiential learning – learning by doing and reflecting upon doing. More concrete proposal would involve all students taking 20 credits of experiential courses, which may include dissertations. At least 60% of courses should be EC that is 'doing or reflecting'. JH asked Reps to what degree their individual degree programmes already included a significant element of EL and whether there is an appetite for more credit bearing opportunities:

Sociology – the Rep felt that the subject area was already doing a lot of this; students create own project which is experiential. They pointed out that EL may possibly enable higher marks, which feeds back to marking criteria. Concern raised that this kind of EL course would have been severely affected by the strikes.

Social Policy – the Rep reported that the subject area did very little EL; students always request help on how to do a Policy Brief, at honours level there was concern about not enough support in 'the doing'; students do not find discussion boards to be popular but the Rep felt they were useful to look at to see how much had been learnt from start to end of a course. Students are desperate for something different from sitting on a laptop and reading journals. The Rep was concerned that EL would struggle to have the rigour that other courses do – for example DSR - and said there was a need to strike a balance. In terms of School level marking criteria, there could be clearly defined marking criteria to evaluate different modes of assessment due to the difference for example between Social Policy/Sociology. Also qualitative research for coursework and marking was challenging.

Sustainable Development – Cases in SD and fieldtrips good examples of EL and it was felt students performed better on this course offered in 3rd year; 4th year SD felt there was a common consensus of feeling unprepared putting knowledge into practice, problem-solving, and questioned how this would look like in a 4th year course and how it would be implemented from courses previously taken; the Rep felt that it was necessary for things to change and there would be a high demand for it. Concerns were raised about introducing the system in 3rd year and that it needs to be set out clearly what is expected, particularly for 3rd/4th year. EL access to, and engagement with, academic staff for feedback and discussion is important, and would become more so on an individual basis.

Politics – generally, not much EL but Edinburgh Award offers EL opportunities. It was raised that internships can only take place with University support, and the introduction of EL may open doors offering opportunities outside UoE. Gerhard added that it was important to implement and upscale as already done at PG level.

Anthropology - has a lot of EL already, e.g. dissertations/internships. It was pointed out that students see these courses as easier to achieve better results in. The Rep was unsure about making EL a requirement.

4. Items raised by a number of subject areas

a. **Cohort building**: It was felt that there were more 1st year community events in other Schools. Politics would like more cohort dines, pub nights and quizzes. The Social Anthropology Society has been working hard arranging events. More supportive marketing of events would be helpful to increase turnout. MC gave a brief explanation about new Student Support Model and how that interacts with Cohort leads for 1st years. The new model has four pillars: academic leadership, student advisers and wellbeing, Teaching teams, and peer support and societies. Cohort leads and subject leads will be given information on what would be beneficial for students with regards to course requirements and engagement events. SR brought up different ways to get in touch to organise and promote events such as SDO, through Student Advisers, newsletters, SPS Comms.

Action points:

- GA suggested a brainstorming session about student-led events;
- Students can contact MC/SR at any point for support if required.

a. **Course choices**: concerns raised that the SD pathway is dominating and taking over the SD part of the degree, and 4th years feel this happens more in honours year of study. There was a general consensus that, when choosing electives, students were not allocated their choices even when sent in on time. It was stressed that cancelled courses in Week 1 is a rarity and a last resort option, and there is always a good reason when it does happen. Discussions around a new process for pre-allocation of courses are taking place, and some students must have priority with core courses when returning from an AIOS.

Action point:

- AB to raise issue of SD pathways with programme director

b. **Marking inconsistencies across**: It was raised that the transition to honours felt like a big jump, there are inconsistencies in the quality of marking and feedback, different ways of assignments, and on occasions PG tutor feedback was not deemed conducive. Politics courses were felt to be marked more harshly than other subject areas. Political Thinkers/IR were courses given as example where markers treat students as Masters rather than learners and therefore overly critical. This is also resonated with Anthropology but feedback generally good. Concern about the impact of strikes was raised, for example, not being able to talk with dissertation supervisors, and concern that a no detriment policy will not be applied. RB explained that we have to follow College/University guidance and there are no update so far. Students encouraged to reach out to course organisers if they don't understand their feedback. MC conveyed that future marking rubrics are currently being looked at.

Action point:

- Communicate future marking rubrics with students once they have been agreed

c. **Dissertation process**: – SocAnth's 3rd year IAR course felt unhelpful, taking place too long before it was deemed useful. Overall, there weren't enough conversations

with possible supervisors and it is often the luck of draw whether an allocated supervisor is knowledgeable about a chosen topic. If on SD JYA, different timing would be good, and there was uncertainty in Politics pathway around proposal deadlines, with dissertation supervisors not being allocated until 4th/5th week. There was an expectation that a draft would be submitted in 2nd semester and the importance and reasoning of timelines need to be clarified. The issue with communication was a key point of concern and that the Politics poster session held just a week before submission. Students were encouraged to speak directly to COs for clarification on these issues.

d. **Online vs in-person teaching (incl. lecture recordings and tutorial attendance)**: Politics in-person tutorial/lab sessions are better, more contributions from students than online, although tutorial attendance appears to drop over the year. SocAnth had particular bad attendance for pre-hons tutorials, and low attendance can be due to poor mental health. MC and SR highlighted engagement monitoring (SEAM) to ensure students are being reached out to and support given if needed. Lecture recordings would have helped the transition from hybrid to in-person, but it is the decision of individual course organisers to record lectures and it is not compulsory for staff. SD students are happy to be back in-person with most lectures recorded, and activities that were difficult to do online were successful.

e. **Impact of strikes and pandemic on student learning and satisfaction:** Students were keen to know whether dissertation deadlines would be amended due to strike action, not getting feedback and supervised meetings. – MC conveyed that deadlines are set as late as possible to ensure marking can be completed and students are able to graduate in July.

The meeting ended without the opportunity to cover point 5 of the agenda. AB suggested to write responses to items raised by individual reps in the minutes (see comments in blue)

5. **Items raised by individual reps**
   a. Emil Casimir Conway – Linguistics and Social Anthropology (4th year)
      - Career advice – the University's Careers Service (https://www.ed.ac.uk/careers) has lots of resources for students to use. Students can make individual appointments to discuss career options, receive help with CVs and interview preparation and much more.

   b. Zohra O'Doherty - EUSA representative for UG students in SPS
      - Closing the feedback loop – staff are regularly being asked to close the feedback loop for their course evaluations questionnaires. AB will remind colleagues of the importance of responding to student feedback.

   c. Luisa Langmann – Sustainable Development (4th year)
      - Study spaces – A number of libraries across the campus have plenty of study spaces and students my want to look beyond the main library if they find that particular venue unsuitable. There are also various bookable spaces: https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/students/study-space/study-space-restrictions-guidance-and-support-2020

d. Casey Chu – Politics (2nd year)

- Assessment deadlines; course timetabling – some clashes are unavoidable, but as assessment deadlines are communicated at the start of the semester, students should be able to organise their work accordingly. Planning and prioritising different deadlines is an important transferable (life) skill.
- Year abroad – students are encouraged to check communications from Edinburgh Global as well as the subject areas' JYA coordinators who organise information events ahead of application deadlines
  https://www.ed.ac.uk/global/go-abroad/study-exchanges
  PIR:
  https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/students/undergraduate/current/programme-information/pir/honours-years/studying-abroad

- Variety of assessment methods – A number of courses, particularly at honours level, are using a variety of assessment methods such as presentations, policy briefs, blogs, Wikipedia entries etc.