

Sustainable Development
Staff-Student Liaison Meeting
29th November 2017
Meeting Room 5
Minutes

Present: 1st Year

Anna Singh
Dhruvi Chakravarthi

2nd Year

Fraser Casey
Freya Robinson

3rd Year

Keshav Bhatnagar

4th Year

Claire Furniss
Laura Silovsky
Abbie Crawford

Isabelle Darmon
Claire Haggett

Apologies: Rachel Howell

Minutes: Sue Renton

Claire welcomed the Programme Reps to the meeting and thanked them very much for their attendance, and all in attendance introduced themselves.

Year 4 Feedback:

SD Teaching: Excellent feedback was received, again, for Rachel's course, from the 16-17 JYA students. Claire gave an overview of Rachel's course for the benefit of students who are in non-honours students. The new SPS mid-semester feedback was found useful.

It was said that it would be helpful to make clearer in SD1a and SD2a that the skills taught there will be useful in years 3 and 4, because the importance of the theories taught was something that was only really appreciated later. Isabelle said that it was really useful to hear that the courses were useful later, because feedback about courses is only obtained at the end of that specific course.

Assessment methods: There were mixed feelings about the move to more Take Home Exams; some students prefer traditional exams, others like them a lot. The mid-semester assessments in SPS are very popular because they give students feedback which they can then use for their final assignment. It was said that Rachel's course (RSC) works very well in this respect, the quizzes were very good and they encouraged students to do small bits of work regularly, which they got feedback on. This formative feedback was very useful, and it was said that this should be done in more courses.

Study spaces: There were concerns about the increased numbers of students (and the difficulty in being able to find somewhere to study, e.g. in the library). Claire said that these concerns have been expressed by staff also. There was a discussion about contact hours. It was noted that Geography have autonomous learning groups organised by students – for example in the course Capital, Land and Power. Student attendance is high and this is popular. For SD students, the dissertation work space is booked by Sue and made available; this was used by some students. Others (for example on the SocAnth pathway) worked together in a group each week.

It was said that there feels less study space available especially with B.04 not being available and occupied by IT/Estates. Claire said that she would support space being booked for students to work together, and Sue will book pods for autonomous learning groups. **ACTION: Student Reps to contact Sue about requirements.**

Tutors: There were mixed responses to undergraduate and postgraduate students attending the same honours class. The importance of the tutor for the quality of the tutorial was stressed. (Several students said that Albert for IDAH had been excellent, and had brought valuable lived experience to bear). It was said that PG tutors had mostly been very good. It was also felt that PG tutors needed more support and better training in the delivery of tutorials. Claire said that there were discussions at a School level about better supporting tutors, and that she will feed this back into these discussions.

Pathway courses: There was a discussion about the role of the pathways, and that they bring in other viewpoints. It was said that other students in other disciplines should be encouraged to take SD courses, especially economics and business. Claire said that SD courses are advertised to encourage this, and that there was a new agreement with Economics about their students taking an 'SD pathway' (Economics and Environmental Studies students now have this option as a way to try and encourage this). This is a new agreement that was recently put in place with Economics.

There was a discussion about courses in the Politics pathway. On the basis of student feedback last year, Global Justice is not compulsory for Politics pathway students (this change was made immediately after the last SSLC meeting in March). Students said that some courses in this pathway are not so relevant for SD. This is one of the reasons why they requirements for the pathways were changed in 2016/17. In third and fourth year, students take 1/3 core SD courses, 1/3 pathway courses, and 1/3 other courses – this final third can be entirely made up of additional SD courses, and there is now a suite of recommended SD courses for students to choose from. Some of these are new and have been designed for SD students. Of the 1/3 courses in the pathway, this means 4 courses over third and fourth year, one of which is a research methods course, so only 3 options from the pathway. This means that there is much more SD than pathway in third and fourth year. However, if students want to take more pathway courses, they can do, and can use their 'other courses' for extra pathway courses.

In the Sociology pathway students the statistical course (DDSR) is more popular than Social Theory, and students take two out of three courses. It was recognised that core courses taken in 3rd year does take the pressure off during 4th year. It was felt that there were more interesting courses offered in semester 2 rather than semester 1. This is something that has been recognised in that department, and there may be some changes made, subject to staff availability and timetabling.

Lecture recording: There was a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of lecture recording and that implications that it has. Lecture recording was a popular idea. Claire said that staff have an opt-in to this and explained her concern about how this could affect teaching overall. Lecture content and delivery, will have to change a lot, students will miss out on key skills, and a lack of engagement and community is a big concern. Students understood the danger. The issue of course lecturers not using microphones was raised and students are urged to contact Sue when this happens so she can promptly address this issue. **ACTION: Students to contact Sue if microphones are not being used**

Careers: There will be two careers sessions organised for SD students in semester 2, and Claire will bring in the SPS Careers Adviser, Jennifer Steven. It was also agreed that a drop-in session would be ideal for students to chat to Jennifer about various topics linked to career and combine 3rd/4th year sessions. Students felt it would be beneficial to have a careers session for 4th years early in semester 1. Information is given to students about careers opportunities, and Jennifer comes to the Welcome meeting, and students are encouraged to use the various facilities and help from the careers service.

Support on the degree: Overall, all SD staff are very appreciated and valued by the 4th year cohort.

Year 3 Feedback:

Dissertations: Dissertation workshops received positive feedback. It was said that the Dissertation workshops are very useful in keeping the dissertation in students' heads and allowing ideas to be shared throughout the group. Some students in other subject areas have a Dissertation retreat and further information on how it is organised and funded should be sent to Claire, also if students are not being allowed to apply for funding for their dissertations, then they should let Claire know.

Students appeared confused about how the dissertation marking criteria and Claire highlighted that information regarding this can be found in the Dissertation Handbook and will remind students of this.

Students said that it would be helpful to have more sessions next year. There is a booked dissertation space available every week.

Fundamentals: A fundamentals type session would be useful a couple of times a semester – not every week, but maybe three times a semester. It was said that something like the dissertation workshop would be useful instead of pathway Fundamentals. Students like the idea of Fundamentals but don't always go. Claire said that there is a School-wide review of Fundamentals taking place, and that attending Fundamentals in pathways allowed students to do well in those subjects and gave them key and transferable skills. SD Fundamentals is something that staff support, and are trying to get extra staff for the degree.

Pathways: 1) Geography - students can only take one method (either quantitative or qualitative) and only get to pick one geography course, and it had been said that some might feel they're missing out. Claire said that the decision to allow students a choice between quantitative or qualitative methods was taken entirely on the basis of student feedback over a long period; students did not like being made to take quantitative methods, so now they have a choice, which is what they had asked for previously. Previously students used to have to take more geography (80 credits in third year) but this meant that there was very little room for SD, and student feedback was very strongly that this was too much geography and not enough SD. So the degree was changed, and in all pathways, there is 1/3 SD, 1/3 pathway, and 1/3 other courses in honours, on the basis of student feedback.

Students said that they do not feel the relevance of some of the geography options. In part this is because of the ranking system for course choices in Geography makes it difficult to get a subject related to SD. The ranking system in Geography has changed many times, and there are difficulties with whichever system has been used, for all students (not just SD). Not all courses will be directly relevant to SD, and this is why the requirements had been changed, and students no longer have to take so many courses.

The SD students don't go on the Geography field trip any more. This is because the field trip is only for single honours Geography students, not joint honours or pathway students. Some geography pathway students said they do not feel that they fit in in geography; but they are SD students and are part of our community. Geography is a very big department, and very different from the small community of SD.

Anthony Newton is very supporting and an excellent contact for Geography pathway students who are struggling or have any issues. Very often students do not turn up to the meetings that he organises. Anthony attends SD exam boards and meetings and socials, and knows the degree very well indeed. He is a very useful source of info in Geography for SD students.

2) Politics – Students feel that there is a disconnect between Politics and SD. Really about the student trying to find where they crossover – just seems like doing a joint honour. Students on the SD degree have a 'home' much more than an JH student, who is in two departments – SD students are part of the SD degree and community, and then have the opportunity to take courses from other pathways.

There was some confusion about dissertations and word counts; all of this is set out clearly in the SD Dissertation Handbook.

3) Other pathways – students would like a diversification of pathways and partnering with other subjects. Perhaps there is a way that this could be done where there is less formal connection between these pathways as there is with the 5 current ones. Students have the opportunity to do this, through the outside courses that they are permitted to take throughout the degree. Unusually, the SD degree allows students to take courses from other subject areas into honours, so students have the opportunity to take courses from other pathways and subjects. It was said that a Business pathway would be great. Staff have been keen to develop this for a long time, and have met with colleagues in Business; discussions are ongoing.

There was a concern about the lack of mention of the pathway in or final degree classification. This has been extensively discussed at every other SSLC; students are encouraged to look at the minutes of meetings (emailed and put on the SD website), to read the Handbook where minutes and key points from them are listed in detail, and to read the emails that are sent about responses to student feedback.

Responding to Sustainability Challenges: This was a popular course and it was said that more courses should be like this. The circular arrangement of the class is good, as is small group work, enjoy the mix between lecture and tutorial. The weekly quiz is good because it forces students to engage, and the screencasts are also very good. Students are very, very happy with the teaching methods and would like them spread through SPS. This course improves confidence and it's really great that the exchange students are incorporated onto the course too. The course was said to be really, really enjoyable, and students thought Rachel was great and it was obvious that she spent a lot of time designing the content to fit into the 10 weeks well. Rachel's enthusiasm was particularly appreciated, and it was said that she was a passionate teacher fires up a class. The RSC course is the best teaching method that some students have come across so far at university.

Some students liked the small, concise assignments, some students like having larger word counts to allow us to explain their points. Some students liked the blog assignment, others did not. Some students said that they did not like the individual feedback being emailed to them, other students like the regular feedback.

Support, wellbeing and cohesion: Mental Health Week was very much appreciated. Students unsure about its set up – whether Uni-wide, or just SPS, but they said more of this type of awareness raising, more safe spaces and more awareness on mental health.

Concerns were raised about how long students have to wait to see a councillor or an advisor at the Student Disability Service. Sue will feed this on. **ACTION: SUE**

Sue explained that she has regular scheduled meetings as the Disability Service 'Named Contact' for those students who have this requirement on their Adjustment Schedule. If a student comes independently to Sue for support and having given it, she then follows up to ensure that the student's wellbeing is continuing to be positive and further support if not. Other times students are 'referred' to Sue by their PT, if the difficulties they are facing are more pastoral than academic. Sue is happy to see any student who contacts her. Scheduled meetings can be arranged and agreed with any student who has had a death in the family, mental health issues or feel they need some extra pastoral support. Students should feel free to contact Sue anytime in their studies to make an appointment to meet and discuss any issues of concern they may be having.

It was said that there is very good support on SD. Visiting students feel included compared to other Erasmus students. The classes and environment feel good. Isabelle a very good Personal Tutor – very attentive, perceptive and responsive to helping, along with Sue. Both going above and beyond to reach out and take a personal interest in what students are involved in at University and more generally. It was good that there's the Staff Student Liaison Committee avenue for feedback and a chance to communicate through other students.

More social events were requested, and more promotion of them. SD Ball/SD Ceilidh was strongly supported and put forward. There are events on the degree, through EUSDA, and Families (and many of these are not well attended) as well as in SPS. Students are very welcome to contribute to the Briefs.

There was a desire for partnerships between SD students and outside organisations. This is something staff have been working on, but it was hugely time-consuming to arrange, and further support is needed. Staff are working on it! Students have the chance to do this through their dissertation topics.

Other: it was said that there was only a small amount of SD on the degree, and a lot of outside things. In pre-honours, there is more degree content than for a single honours degree. In honours, the degree is 2/3 SD and 1/3 relevant to SD courses from the pathway.

Year 2 Feedback:

Tutorial Allocator: This has again been very problematic for students, especially when having to request re-allocation to a different slot. This created extra work for students, and lots of uncertainty. It was not a step forward.

Exchange: Isabelle will be leading a session on student exchanges for any interest in study away during 3rd year. All students with an interest are encouraged to attend.

Courses: IDAH received very positive feedback and students said it was a loved course. The lecturer (SJ Cooper-Knock) was praised, the teaching style was great, the content was ideal and students received lots of great feedback. The tutors were all very good indeed, especially Albert who brings great lived experience, but all tutors were praised. It all fits very well together. The course also fits well if taking International Cooperation in Europe and Beyond.

PIR fundamentals were felt to be tailored more towards Politics as was the case with careers. Special careers sessions for SD students are being organised in addition.

It was said that autonomous learning groups were used in Philosophy, where they don't have PALS, and were framed as mandatory. Students meet each week before essays to share ideas.

It was said that an Economics or Business pathway would be good; as above, this is a work in progress!

Support: Students said that there is a lot of love for the degree. In second year there is a lot of cohesion and they feel very supported, particularly by Claire and Sue.

Year 1 Feedback:

Settling in: students said that they felt really well settled into the degree.

SD1a: students said that they were really enjoying SD1a, the blocks worked very well and the connections between them. The focus on solutions was useful. The tutors and the debates were popular and students could access sample essays.

Courses: everyone was happy with their core and recommended courses. It was said that Our Changing World was a good course and gave a chance to meet other students interested in the same sorts of things. Politics tutorials were graded which was good, and it got people more involved, especially with graded assessments and weekly quizzes.

The tutorial allocator had been very difficult to use.

Peer support: The new 'Families' peer scheme has helped connect 1st year students to students already on the degree programme. Everyone was also very connected on Facebook too and felt that they all knew each other well. A spring get together was being planned.

More advice and support on how to structure your first essay would be beneficial, and the PALS essay writing session was appreciated by all those who attended.

It was suggested that, to make it easy to decide a final pathway, experiencing a taste of all courses and pathways would be helpful, earlier on. One of the other students said that it would be possible to meet up with new first years in different pathways at the start of the year, and Claire was very grateful for this offer.

ACTION: Sue to arrange this with PALS/Families members/interested SD students further up through the degree

Students would also like to know more about the technology that they needed to use at the start, such as Learn and MyDiscoverEd. Claire said that based on previous student feedback, this had been moved back from Welcome Week when students had said that they felt overwhelmed with too much information. This is useful to know when planning the next year's Welcome Week.

ACTION: SUE to feed this back for Welcome Week planning

Claire thanked all the reps for coming and for all their efforts in getting and giving feedback from their year groups. The date of the s2 meeting will be announced shortly.