COURSE
MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Goldsmiths offers a myriad of degrees with very interesting and unusual combinations. One of the most valuable parts of studying at Goldsmiths is that students are encouraged to pursue their own interests while thinking critically. However, often many students are unable to get the most out of their degree due to poor course management.

Key aspects of Course Management:

- Accuracy of marketing: What students are told about the structure of their degree programme and facilities via the website, open days and marketing content.
- Accessibility of module options: What modules are available to students, how they link to each other, practical vs. theoretical balance.
- Timetabling: The ability for students to choose modules they are interested in and the clashes they face as joint honours.
- Organisation and communication of course content: via email, the VLE and between and across departments, especially for joint honours students.
- Facilities: Looking at lecture rooms, seminar rooms, studios, labs and workshops and how well they are able to support the students.

Aims

This report will make clear what precisely needs to be done to improve course management at Goldsmiths (and of course what is already successful which could be built upon further). In order to achieve this we have aimed to:

- Gauge student feedback regarding their feelings towards the day-to-day running of their courses.
- Gauge staff feedback regarding their feelings towards the day-to-day running of courses within their department.
- Uncover these specific areas which require improvement as well as good practices within course management.
- Conduct a cross examination between various departments to allow for the sharing of best practises.

Methodology

Our group contributed 10 questions to the DSC Annual Survey, which was distributed among all students, and collected 1,322 responses. All questions allowed participants to give additional comments if desired.

We also conducted qualitative data. The authors of this report spoke to 8 numbers of staff from different departments in the form of interviews. We also recruited students through casual conversations. This mixed method approach provided a more detailed understanding of course management.

We used the same questions asked in the survey to talk to the following staff:

- Head of Anthropology
- Head of History Department
- Manager of Institute of Management Studies
- Head of Media and Communications department
- Departmental Business Manager Media and Communications
- Head of Politics department
- Head of Sociology department
- Psychology Departmental Business Manager

Findings and Results

Q3: Is your course well organised?

Findings:
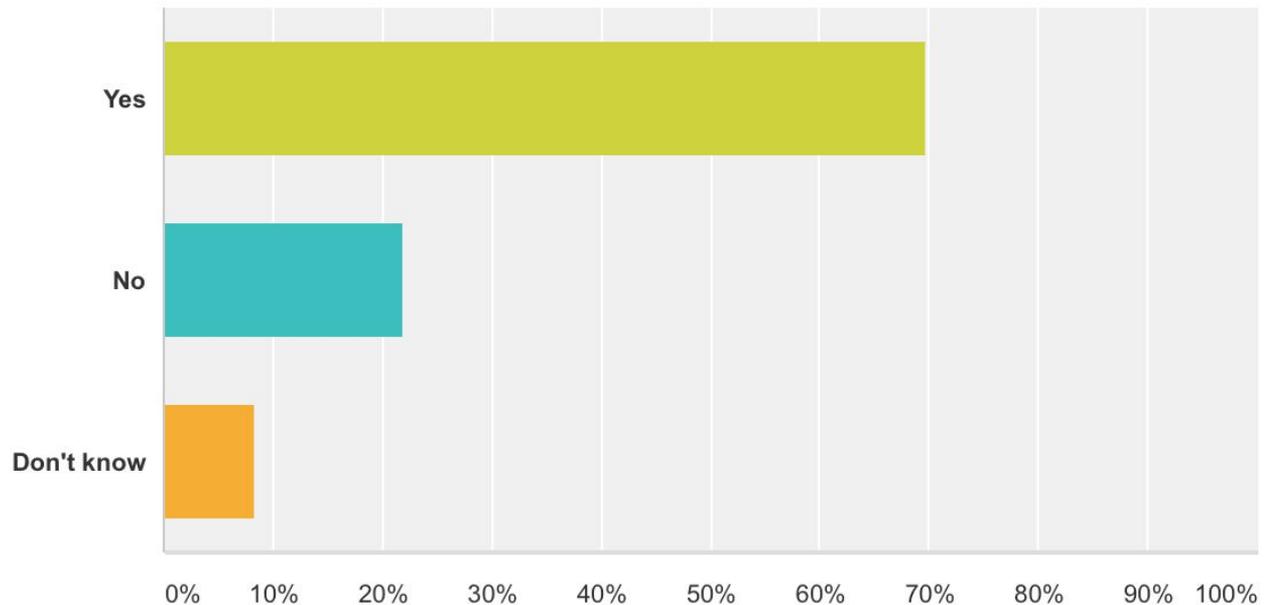
For this question we received 1169 responses out of which 816 (69.8%) students responded that their course was well organised, and 256 (21.9) students said it was not.

While the majority of students said that their course was well organised, over 20% of students is a very high number. The comments made by students raised specific concerns that need attention.

Timetabling came up as one of the most disorganised aspects of the courses:

- They are often published after term has begun, or changed after term starts.
- Often the timetables provided online are incorrect or inaccessible to students
- Last minute changes to rooms and timings.
- Online timetabling system is often not updated when changes are made to rooms or timings
- Examination timetable is published too close to the exams not giving students enough time to organise themselves.

Course structure is not being explained to students very well and communication also needs improvement:

- VLE is not standardised for all courses, some are updated and very informative, while some have nothing posted on them

Examples of an inconsistent Vle page:

No standardisation, some weeks have no additional content, lecture notes/slides or key reading listed. Very disorganised.

Examples of a well updated and informative Vle page:

Left: Clearly organised timetables, tutor group lists posted on the course page. List of useful contacts so students can easily find a variety of contacts they may need.

Right: Weekly posts, that clearly state the required and suggested readings for each lecture. Along with lecture notes/ slides for future reference.

- Communication between departments is lacking.
- Students feel confused due to lack of standardisation in communication.
  - Student quoted from DSC survey: "Vital course information as well info on events and discussion groups are spread over numerous online platforms and physical noticeboards. These took me an entire year to learn how to navigate, to get the best out of my course"

Recommendations:

Even though timetabling has been centralised, there need to be improvements

- Require departments with joint courses to communicate and ensure there are no clashes
- Ensure online system is up to date and accessible to students
- Communicate changes to all students via email and VLE
- Provide finalised timetables before the beginning of term

- Provide examination timetables at the beginning of term.

There needs to be a standardised system of communication

- Things should be emailed to students and posted on the Vle consistently across all departments and modules.

Standardisation of VLE

- Require all departments, joint courses and modules to have up to date VLE pages
    - Ensure upcoming events, guest lectures, tutor/ seminar groups, meeting dates, etc are all posed onto departmental/ course VLE pages.
- Require updates on VLE pages
    - Allow students to flag pages that they think are out of date.
    - Ensure lecture notes and slides are uploaded every 5 weeks*, allowing students to refer back to them for assessments.

*Most modules are 10 or 20 weeks long, as reading week is in the 6th week of each term, updating the VLE every 5 weeks will ensure students will have updated information for both formative and summative assessments.

Q4: Is your course what you expected it to be?

Findings:
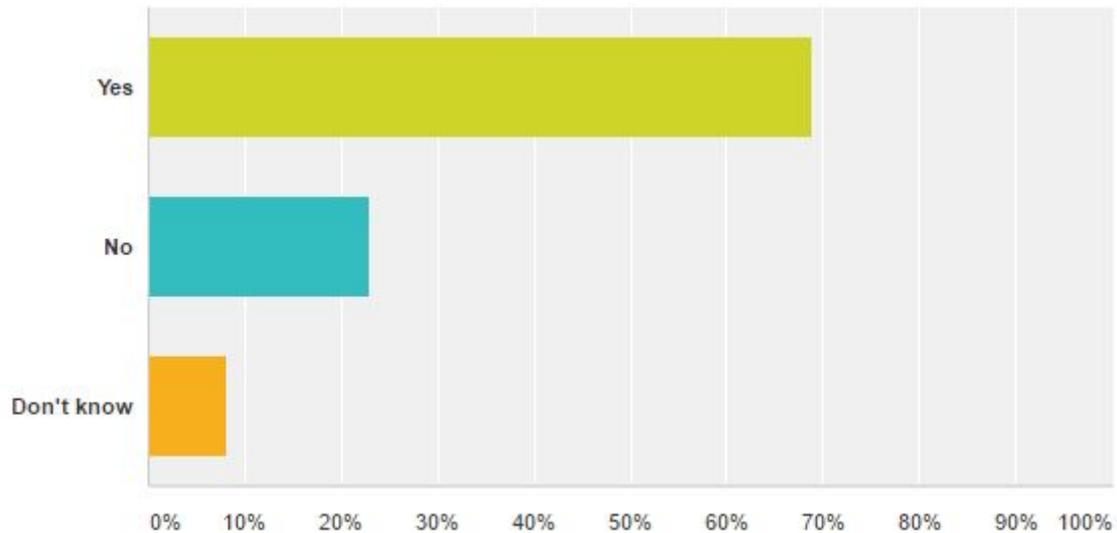
Out of 1.169 students only 153 skipped this question, leaving the total number to 1.016 students who answered. 68.86% of the students said yes, and the 22.93% said no, with remaining 8.21% stating that they weren't sure. Some of the replies were, that they had no clear expectations of their course, but expected more links between different departments.

Another student said, that when initially signing up to the psychology and management course there would be more focus on the management of the degree as well. However, after being thoroughly disappointed and uninspired due to the lack of management input, that person switched straight to psychology.

Some additional quotes:

Psychology with Clinical Psychology:
''Yes, I believe the courses has been going parallel to how it has been marketed. However, I would have appreciated if we had additional courses related to Clinical Psychology (i.e. discussing case studies, group therapies, different psychological therapies)''

Psychology with Management:
''I was in one of the streams but we didn't really learn anything related to management in the first two years and this year there are compulsory modules that are not really useful to my career choice so I didn't want to stay in the stream. It'd be better to have an open choice of what modules we can take, like all other psychology students.''

History:
''before I started at university is the diversity in options of modules. One of the big pulls of Goldsmith's for me was the fact that it is part of the University of London and as such publicised the availability of profuse amounts of modules to choose from across different universities under this umbrella. However, there were only few to choose from as well as a

much smaller amount of modules offered by the university itself, many of which are rather niche.''

In terms of the way the courses and module selection were marketed, many students felt that the university has overstated the range of options a bit.

Recommendations:

- Provide more specific sample module options. A lot of students felt that the advertised options did not match the reality of what the university actual offers. Perhaps only upload the module packet from the previous year.
- Incorporate more students feedback into module balance. It seems that there is some disproportionality for joint honour degrees.
- Ensure joint courses aren't too heavily based in one department.

Q5: Do you know who to go to in your dept if you have a problem?

Findings:
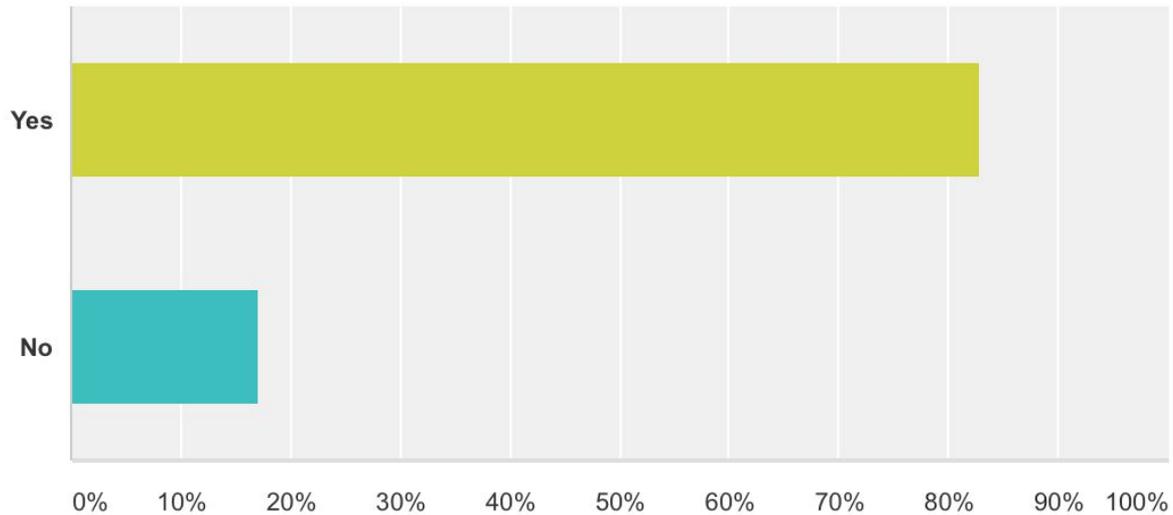
A total of 1,169 students responded to this question. 82.89% of them felt like they knew who to go to if they had a problem. Each progressive year, more undergraduates know who to go to, with the exception of those in foundation year, almost 95% of them know who to go to. This could be due to the fact that student resources are not being properly communicated to first years. Qualitative research suggests that while many students know who to speak with, many of them don't feel comfortable doing so. Some students commented that they have never met with their personal tutor or that they were "rude and unhelpful."It also seems that there is a lack of knowledge about other student resources, such as the well-being and student centers. Some felt there wasn't anyone to talk to if they had a personal or administrative problem.

Recommendations:

Make sure to communicate early and clearly resources available for students.

- Specific tutors/mentors
- Wellbeing and student centers
- Department Offices

Q6: Do you have a personal tutor in your dept. that is easily reachable?

Findings:
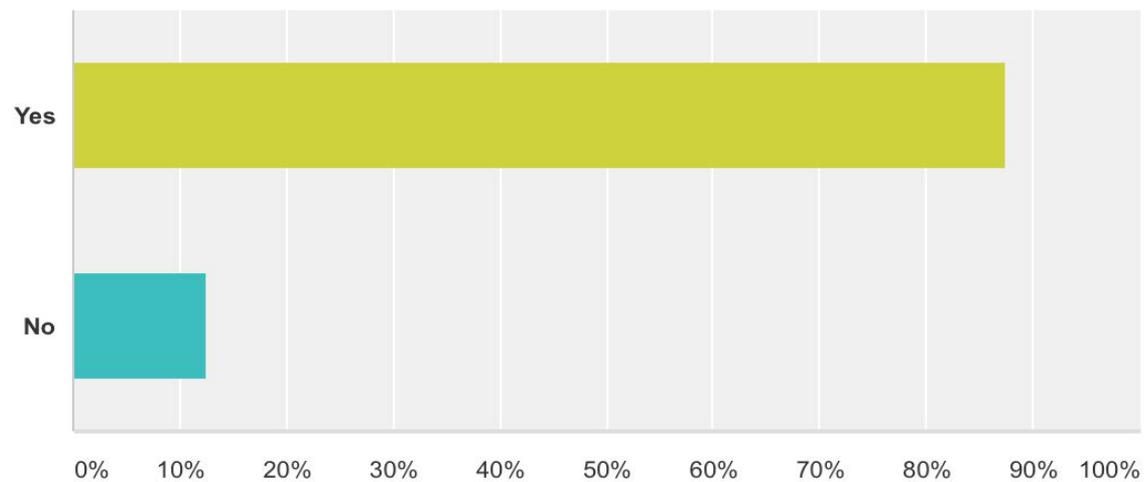
Out of 1,169 students, 87.51% answered yes, with 12.9% answering no. On looking at the comments, across departments, it became apparent that a recurring problem is whilst students may know who their personal tutors are, they have never met with them or do not have any sort of relationship with them. Qualitative findings have also indicated that the tutor system varies across the college, for example undergraduate anthropology has personal tutors allocated for whole year groups, whereas undergraduate art students have a tutor that they meet with regularly who is able to assist with pastoral issues. The statistics show that over 90% of Art students feel they have a personal tutor who is 'reachable' and 'informative', which is higher than other courses. Furthermore the comments reveal that some students feel there is an issue with responses from tutors to emails.

Recommendations:

- It appears that students would benefit from an opportunity to meet personal tutors, and being made aware of the pastoral structures.
- Enforce the existing policy that personal tutors should meet with, or attempt some communication with, their students in the first term.
- Understandably, personal tutors may have a lack of time for compulsory meetings with all their students. However, as demonstrated through the examples of art students having individualised tutors, this could be combatted by introducing more personal tutors with less students whom they are responsible for, making it a more 'personalised' system.

Q7: Are you happy with the feedback you receive?

Findings:

Undergraduate and postgraduate:
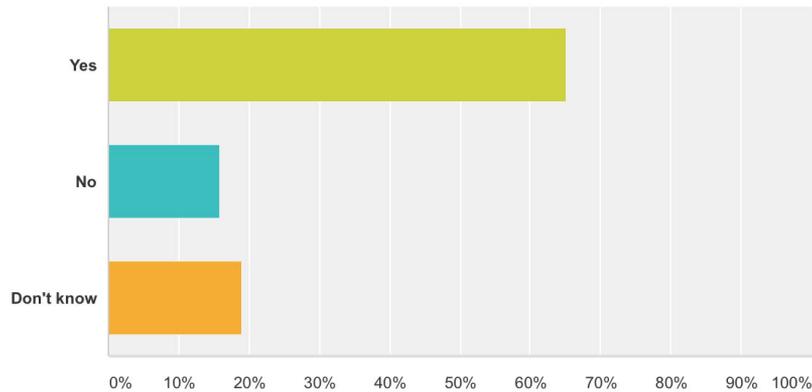
Postgraduate:

Out of 1, 169 students, 65.1% answered yes, 15.91% no, and 18.99% said they did not know. The comments indicate a common concern amongst students is that their feedback does not include enough comment on how to improve their work, and that feedback detail varies from tutor to tutor.
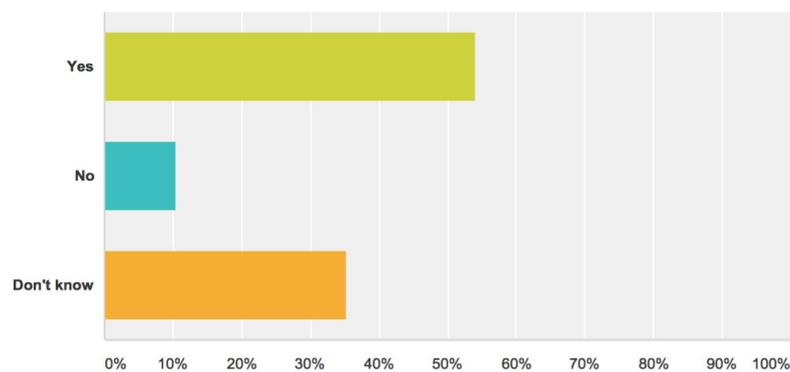
For postgraduate students the 'don't know' category is significantly higher at 35.35%. Reading through the comments it appears many postgraduates had answered this as they had received no feedback at the time of completing the survey. A postgraduate psychology student reported they had not had any assignment feedback by January, with their first assignment being handed in at christmas.whereas a student from IMS had received multiple examples of feedback by this point.

Qualitative research within the anthropology department revealed that students surveyed would prefer more verbal feedback for written assessment. With 70% of the 33 students on the module stating they had never gone for a one on one meeting with a course convenor following assessment results.

Recommendations:

- A review of standardised marking criteria, including a standardisation of grade numbers given. For example across departments there should be a review of what constitutes the highest grade within the 'first' bracket; some students experience getting 80 as an exceptional first, whereas others receive low 70's. Different tutors, within departments, have conflicting feelings about what the highest numerical grades given should be.
- More information within feedback on how to improve the content of the essay. Referring to the qualitative research within the anthropology dept., this could be combatted with an introduction of mandatory course convenor feedback meetings, across departments. More 'verbal' feedback is requested across departments.
- Postgraduates: increased amount of feedback in the autumn term for postgraduate courses that have little assessment in the first term. Possibly in the form of formative essays, giving students an opportunity for feedback if they wish.

Q8: Is there a variety in the way you are assessed?

Findings:
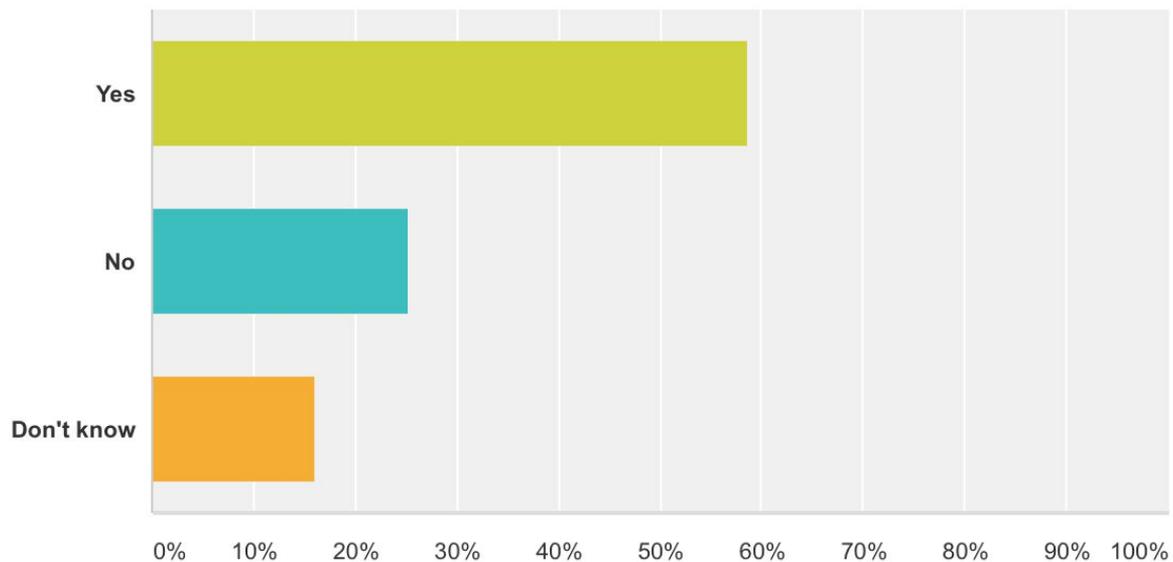
Out of the participants who answered this question, 58.6% answered 'Yes', 25.24% answered 'No' and 16.17% answered 'Don't Know' (Combined totals for full-time/part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate).

Recommendations:

These results must be considered objectively, as the assessments for the humanities and social sciences differ from those of the creative subjects. It is unclear from the results whether students would prefer a deviation from the orthodox methods and to see a greater diversity in assessment methods.

However, departments such as Politics offer a number of modules where alternative methods of assessment are now employed. Such assessments includes: visual projects, public interventions, counter-dictionary entries, blogging and manga comics. There are number of benefits to this variety, as shown below:

- They remain challenging and intellectually engaging. Students are still required to critically ponder material in an equal fashion to orthodox methods of assessments.
- Methods of assessments such as the ones seen above allow students to apply their subject matter to cultural artefacts found within everyday life, showing how their subject remains relevant outside of the traditional academic sphere.
- They give staff more interesting and diverse pieces of work to mark, making it a far less tedious process.

Departments might consider at least giving students the option of being assessed in an alternative fashion. Indeed, the politics department prides itself on offering a different approach to the subject, with assessments one of the methods this is achieved. This would allow departments to stand out from competitor departments and different institutions.

Q10: As a joint honours student do you feel like the course is well managed?

Findings:
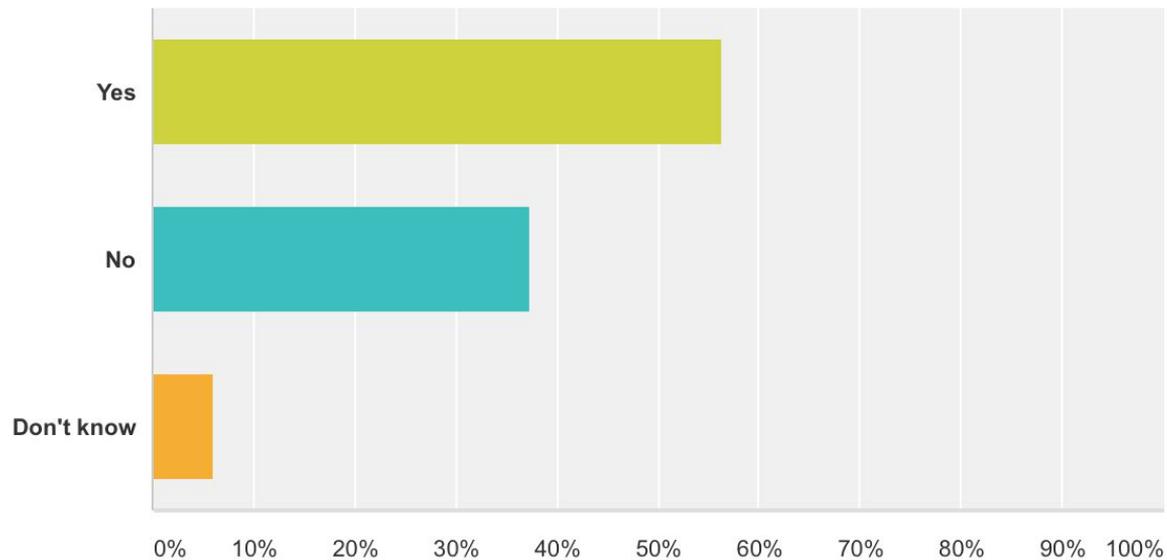
For this question we received 179 responses out of which 101 (56.42%) students responded that their joint honours course was well managed; with 67 (37.43%) students claiming it was not. 11 students said they were unsure, this is because they felt that it differed from each department and was often quite confusing to understand which department they belonged to. While half of the students that answered this question said that their joint honours course was well organised, 37.43% of students disagreeing is a very high number. There are a number of comments made by joint honours students that have raised specific concerns that need attention.

- Lack of communication between the two departments is the biggest issue, some students have stated they aren't entirely sure who their course conveners are in each department – due to absence or people leaving roles. Or are often given conflicting advice. There are issues regarding the lack of communication and support for joint honours students especially when it comes to dissertations.
- One respondent has stated:

"There is definitely a lack of communication between the departments (sociology and anthropology), unless staff know each other and have connections, but most of the time they don't. There is confusion around who our conveners are for anthropology and for sociology since staff members have left/ aren't doing those roles anymore. The course is great, but there is uncertainty about how 'well managed' it is, the organisation doesn't seem to be as good as it could or should be."

- Disjointed feeling, especially within Fine Art and History of Art, students feel distant from one of the subjects, which is only adding to an already demanding and stressful course.
- Many students feel as though they are studying two separate subjects which is impacting their overall student experience.

"I feel there is little guidance or communication specific to our course. There have been problems with timetables."

- Schedule overlaps, deadlines on the same day, lecture clashes between departments or days without any breaks in them. Qualitative interviews with joint honours students in the anthropology department have revealed the stress related to having multiple deadlines on a single date.

Recommendations:

- The possibility of introducing link modules for joint honours students earlier in the course, to make joint degrees more coherent, as they are often offered later in 2nd and 3rd years.
- More communication with exam boards and departments to manage assessment deadline clashes for joint honours students.
- Ensure students know who their course conveners are within both departments.
- Across all joint honours courses bring in modules, assessments or lectures that bring together both disciplines so students feel their course is less disjointed.

Q11: As a joint honours student, do you feel like your course is multidisciplinary (do the two departments complement each other or do they appear more stand alone)?

Findings:
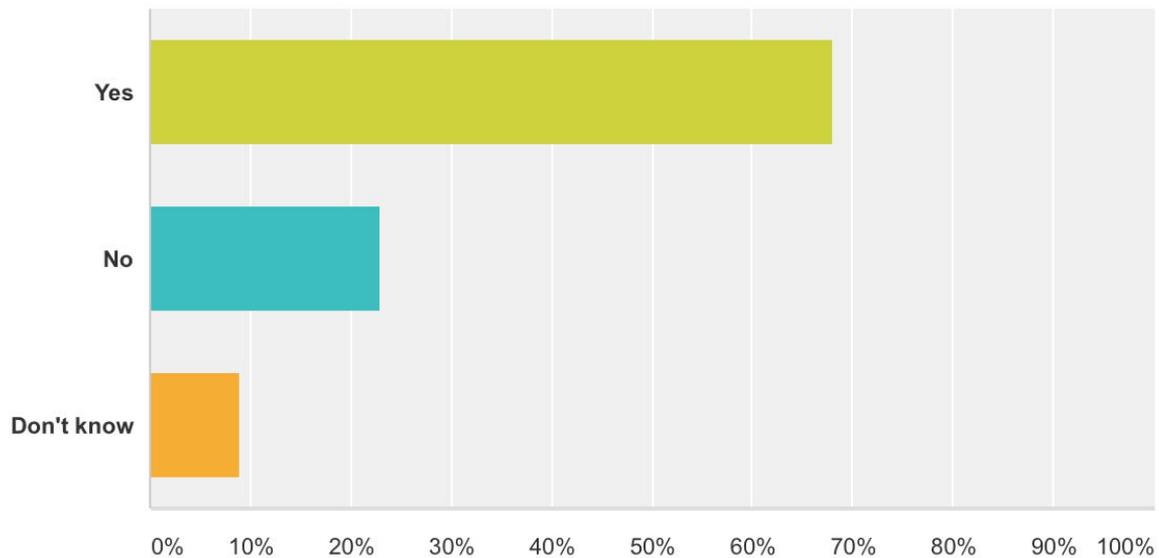
- With a total of 179 responses and an additional 54 comments in response to this question, we found that 68.16% joint hours students responded that yes they felt their course was multidisciplinary and so a positive outcome. However at the same, 22.91% responded 'No' and 8.94% were unsure.
- 77.78% PG students responded 'yes'.
- 67.65% UG students responded 'yes' (Anthropology - being the best represented, art and visual cultures, computing, english media) and 23.53% responded 'no' (media, sociology, politics, art, history, anthropology)

'Yes' responses stated that…
- Course content and modules were interdisciplinary, e.g.overlap between readings and theorists which they could use across the two different subjects in their degree.

'No' responses stated that..
- Some felt that course content did stand alone = taught differently by different departments, this was not a negative and positive thing for some, created variety.
- Some students felt the multidisciplinary nature of their degree programme was not there from the beginning and they were unsure about how their joint degree would mesh together. Most felt that this link was developed later in their degree:

"We were warned that for the 1st Year, we would be basically split between the 2 departments and in 2nd Year, they would be united."

"At first they felt very much stand alone but as I get further into the course they begin to complement each other more, e.g. last term when doing film and the audiovisual (for the media side of course) and beginning my creative writing part of the english side, the two worked very well together as we were looking at writing and reading screenplays in the creative writing module."

- Students, in particular joint honours Media and Communications, feel that they should have a module which is explicitly multidisciplinary, like Fine Art students, one whom stated *"we have a termly 'link seminar' to apply art theory to art practice"*.

"The topics compliment each other by nature, however the departments do not take advantage of this to create a multi-disciplinary module. Often they are clueless about what we have done with the other departments"

"I was expecting to be looking a lot more at how history and anthropology play into each other and how they are relevant to one another rather than being taught history and anthropology as separate subjects."

- Modules shared by single honours students and joint honours students should not always be taught and catered towards single honours degrees in terms of assessment and learning outcomes:

"For media and sociology, all students except current 3rd years now have a very interdisciplinary curriculum and much of media theory is sociological. However, more needs to be done and is being discussed about making the dissertation more differentiated and less catered towards single honours students."

"They are quite stand alone, the fine art department does not allow joint honours students to get involved with fine art single honours activities which I think is an institutional failure."

Recommendations:
- Make the interdisciplinary link in joint subjects present from the beginning e.g. through multidisciplinary modules e.g. Media and Sociology have Media and the Social (1st year), create more link modules taught by lecturers from each department
- Course content for most is OK but make shared modules distinguishable for joint honours students through acknowledging different learning outcomes and assessments.
- Major improvement needs to be done to improve communication between departments as students feel isolated. Maybe create a joint honours liaison officer for each joint honours programme as it seems joint honours convenors are not working. OR ensure that joint honours convenors are formalised and improve communication.
- When asked about creating a joint liaison officer role, the media department were unsure.

"Apart from my practical, I feel like I just belong to two separate departments. It would be great if there was a go-to office or space just for our joint honours degree, as well as meetings and events" (media and communications with english)"

"They appear more stand alone which can be confusing in terms of clarification with modules, schedules and who to contact for problems that arise for just joint honours students. The department should liaise more."

Q12: Joint honours- have you had a timetable clash?

Findings:
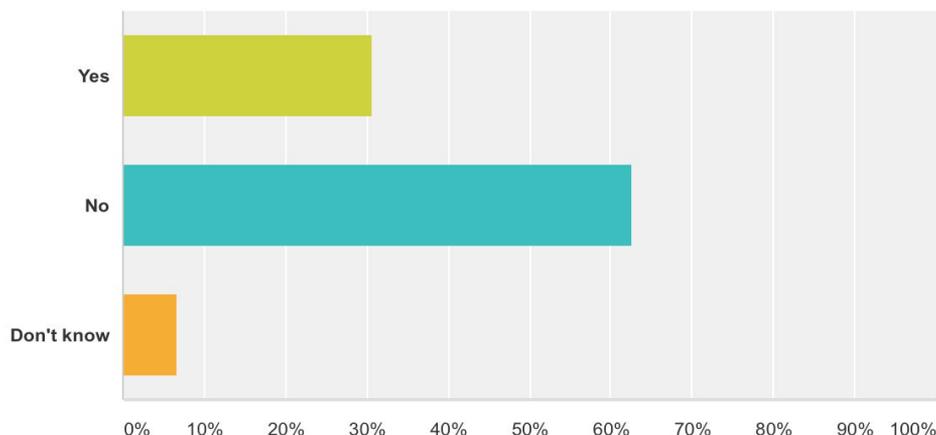
177 quantitative responses: 31% of respondents have experienced timetable clashes, 62% reported no clashes and 7% answered 'don't know'. An additional 27 qualitative responses provides more detail of the difficulties experienced with timetable clashes.

- Students mention that when choosing modules there are limitations on what they can actually select due to so many potential clashes, which considerably limits their options. *"Choosing modules was a problem as so many of them clashed, this affected the modules i chose and therefore affected how well i did"*.
- Respondents also highlighted that modules were quick to fill up, *"Module options are often filled up very quickly, leading to a lot of us being forced to choose a module we have no interest in, which shouldnt happen as we are paying £9000 year to study what we are interested in"*.
- Drama have shown flexibility by managing to change a compulsory module that clashed with all desired modules, *"Compulsory drama clashed with everyone's desired modules in our final year so we managed to get it changed"*.
- Timings of lectures and seminars are not given to students when selecting modules.
- Numerous comments mention that they know of people who have had clashes and/or expect it to happen in their next year. It is therefore an expected problem amongst quite a high %.
- Two hour back to back with no break.
- Two responses asked for artist talks and seminars to be linked as they often clash.

Recommendations:

Communication between departments when timetabling, as this prevents students from being choosing modules.

- Students may not be aware that timetable clashes can be changed early on in the year. i.e. In drama. Make more aware of deadline to highlight timetable clashes.
- Offer students the timings of lectures and seminars so that long back to backs or clashes can be avoided, if they want to avoid them.
- Make students in IMS (particularly pg) aware that they can choose optional modules from other departments.

Conclusions and Suggestions

We would like to propose some solutions to problems we have identified with the management of courses at Goldsmiths:

Course organisation and communication
- Ensure VLE is up to date and accessible to students
- Communicate changes to all students via email and VLE regularly and consistently
- Provide finalised timetables before the beginning of term
- Provide examination timetables at the beginning of term
- Offer students the timings of lectures and seminars so that long back to backs or clashes can be avoided, if they want to avoid them
- Make students aware that they can choose optional modules from other departments through institutionalising the 'course options fair.'

Course marketing and expectations
- Accurate and correct information to be given on website, open days, applicant days and marketing material
- Allow more students to participate in marketing to give honest picture to prospective students

Personal tutors and where to seek help
- Enforce the existing policy that personal tutors should meet with, or attempt some communication with, their students in the first term

Assessment and feedback
- Stronger enforcement of face-to-face meetings/tutorials to discuss feedback
- More information within feedback on how to improve the content of the essay. Referring to the qualitative research within the anthropology dept., this could be combatted with an introduction of mandatory course convenor feedback meetings, across departments.
- Copies of assessed work to be made available to students
- Reinforced time frame in which feedback should be given back in line with the 3-5 week policy
- Offer a variety of assessment methods rather than coursework/exam dichotomy
- Standardisation of grade numbers given. E.g across departments there should be a review of what constitutes the highest grade within the 'first' bracket; some students experience getting 80 as an exceptional first, whereas others receive low 70's. Different tutors, within departments, have conflicting feelings about what the highest numerical grades given should be
- Postgraduates: increased amount of feedback in the autumn term for postgraduate courses that have little assessment in the first term. Possibly in the form of formative essays, giving students an opportunity for feedback if they wish

Joint honours students
More standardised communication between departments to ensure that:
- Students know who their course conveners are within both departments and that these convenors are formalised and liaise with each other more;
- Departments manage assessment deadline and module clashes.

Create and deliver an interdisciplinary curriculum from the beginning of their degrees to ensure that students do not feel isolated or confused. Make their experience less disjointed by:

- Providing 'link' modules, assessments or lectures that bring together both disciplines;
- Encourage lecturers from both departments to work together to provide these;
- Successful attempts so far include;
    - Media and Sociology have Media and the Social (1st year),
    - Fine Art and Art History have a termly link seminar