Goldsmiths, University of London

DSC Annual Project Report 2015-16
Options and Modules

Goldsmiths, University of London

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Introduction and Background

The ability for students to choose different options and modules is an important and tailored aspect of a Goldsmiths undergraduate and postgraduate education. The object of this report has been to collect data from students reflecting on their experiences when selecting their modules and options, in order to gain insight into best practices, what is not working well, and what students would like to see changed or carried forward in the process. The authors of this report have looked into how well students felt their departments communicated their options in choosing modules (including from other departments and Universities of London), if students felt there had been changes to modules as originally advertised, how satisfied students were with the modules options available to them, and satisfaction with the procedures that enable students to find necessary information about modules and make informed decisions, as well as how to improve any issues.

Aims of the Project

The aims of this project were to use the data collected through surveys and discussions to understand students' misgivings and praises in regards to options and modules. Attention was focused in following areas:

1. **The module selection process**
2. **Communication – timing and methods**
3. **Identifying least satisfied students and why they felt this way**

The authors of this report sought to highlight where improvements could be made to make the selection process as straightforward and accessible to students as possible.

Methodology

629 undergraduate and postgraduate students responded to the DSC Annual Project Research Survey. The questions posed to students regarding options and modules included:

1. On a scale of 1-10, how well did your department communicate all options available to you (ability to take modules from other departments, UoLs, etc) this year when the module options were released?
2. Were there any changes made to the module as originally advertised?
3. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with the module options available to you - taking into account compulsory modules and schedule clashes?
4. Do you feel that there could be improvements made to the module options selection process? If so, what kind of improvements?
5. Do you feel that enough time and explanation has been provided regarding the module choices?
6. How satisfied are you with the scope of material included in the modules you study?

All questions allowed participants to give additional comments if desired.

Which department do you belong to?
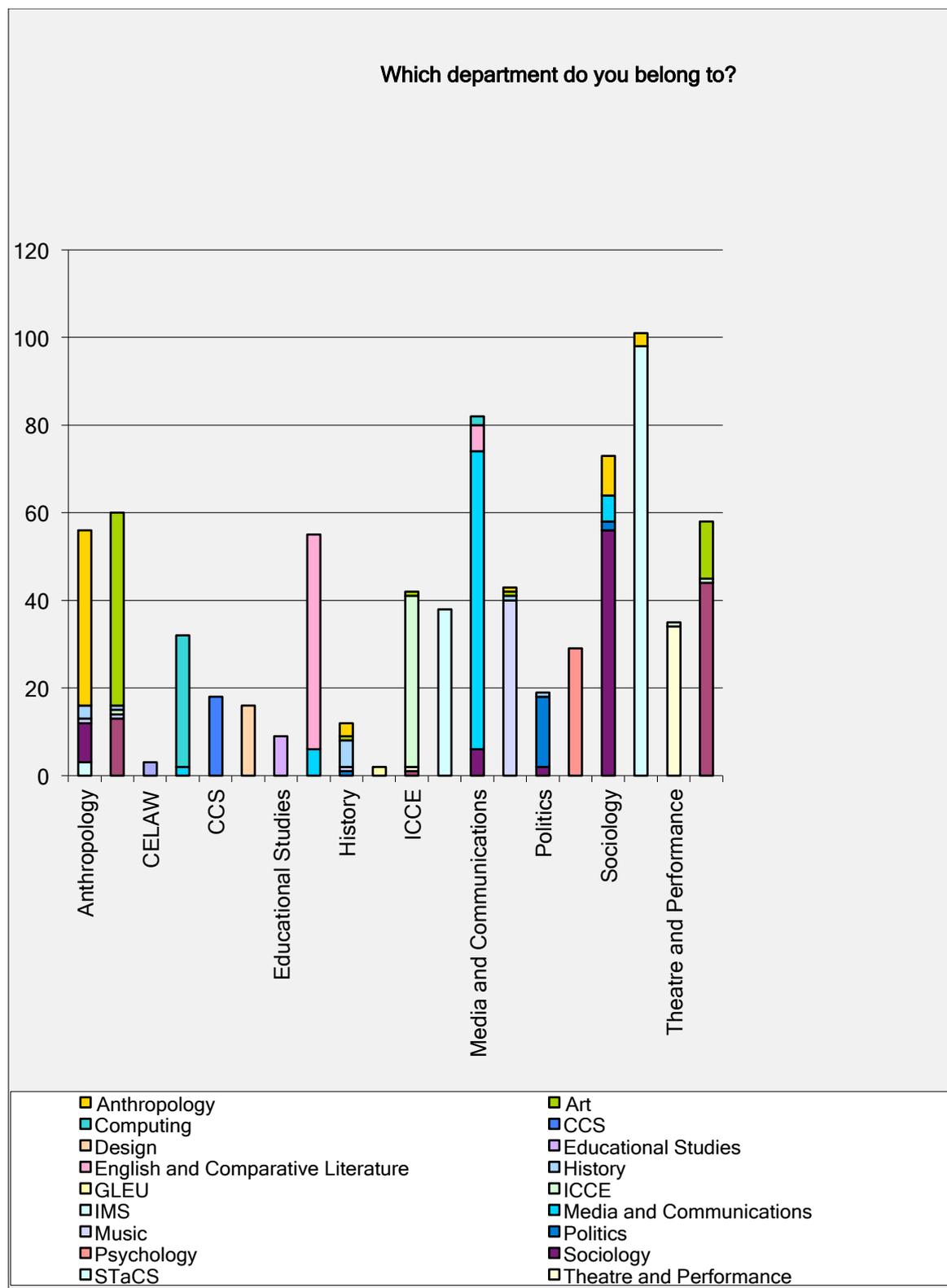
Breakdown of the 629 Annual Project Research Survey respondents

In addition to results from the survey, information regarding the process of and communication around choosing options and modules was further investigated by the report authors in conversations with the following people:

- Staff member, Strategic Planning Office; discussed how the online selection process works and how the system has changed
- Staff member, English and Comparative Literature dept.; discussed the department's contributions to organisation of modules, and the selection process
- Staff member, Music dept.; discussed the department's contributions to organisation of modules, and the selection process
- Staff member, STaCS dept.; discussed the department's contributions to organisation of modules, and the selection process
- Staff member, History department and Staff member, Careers; set up a focus group with students

In total, the authors of this report spoke with 6 individual staff people from different departments.

Individual students were also spoken to in regards to their personal experiences in choosing options and modules. Approximately 146 students were interviewed by authors of this report to gather further qualitative data.

Difficulties and Limitations

The report authors experienced some difficulties in obtaining information for this report and wish to highlight all limitations to data, analysis, and recommendations.

To gain a wide range of opinions regarding the process and communication around choosing options and modules, the authors of this report sought to speak with any and all students and staff people who might be involved. 15 Departmental Business Managers (DBMs) were contacted via email and sent a follow-up message to find a time to meet and discuss the project. However, the authors of this report only received feedback from staff people in the 6 departments highlighted above in Methodology.

The authors of this report are proud of the work accomplished in speaking with a large number of individual students to gain further personal insight into issues students have been experiencing regarding options and modules. However, a majority of the students spoken with were undergraduates and many came from one department, Media and Sociology. Though the authors of the report realise this is less than ideal, it is felt that the information gathered from individual students fit within the trends of data gathered from a wider range of students in the Annual Project Research Survey, and thus did not skew data nor have an effect on analysis and recommendations.

Results and Findings

Options and modules: Programmes and Intercollegiate Options

Regarding the communication of intercollegiate and other UoL school modules options:

- 41% of survey respondents gave a rating of 5 or below (with 1 being the lowest option available and 10 being the highest)
- 14% of which fell into the lowest possible rating
- Over 19% of survey respondents skipped this question
- Over 39% of survey respondents rated their departments communication in this area as satisfactory or above
- Some respondents suggested the VLE is too difficult to navigate and this contributes to lack of understanding in option and module selection

    Students expressed a lack of communication of intercollegiate module options within their departments.

Communicating Changes to Modules

- Over 22% of survey respondents said that there were changes to the course after they had been chosen
- Issues largely dealt with lack or lateness of communication as opposed to the changes themselves - comments included:

    'Communicated, but very late'
    'It would be great to get a little advance notice'
    'They were communicated in the first course meeting - not early enough.'

- Specific issues with **postgraduate students** - some of whom had relocated and spent lots of money on their degree to arrive and discover differences to the modules as described or have very limited options. One student said:

    'I specifically wrote in my personal statement that I wanted to take course X and Y. When we were selecting modules those two had been removed.'

- **Joint honours students** highlighted the problem that last minute changes could pose as obstacles to them as they have to cross-check two timetables, so communicating changes has to be done early. One student commented that:

    'The time and day of one of mine was changed [...] had I chosen a different English module it would have been a real problem.'

- The **Strategic Planning Office**, about the system - all changes from the departments have to be ratified by the Quality Office, which could explain why communication is so last minute.

Essentially, issues with communication lie in the time taken to relay any changes to modules. They're often relayed in the first weeks of term.

Communication of Options

This section examines the issues of how the choices of option modules are communicated from the department to students.

- 64% of survey respondents rated the option modules offered to them as satisfactory or higher
- Still, over 26% of survey respondents gave a rating of 5 or below for the options offered
- When asked if they felt the way modules and options are selected could be improved upon, answers were split almost in half – 52% answering yes and 47.94% answering no.
- Most common and complained about issue - **lack of communication**
- Students would like to be informed about options from their specific departments at enrolment
- Specifics of module content and assessment should be communicated **clearly** and **definitively** from the beginning of the course

There is a clear lack of communication between departments and students and different means of bringing information are encouraged

Conclusion

Having heard from approximately 775 students and spoken to 6 members of staff, it has become clear that <u>communication is the issue that needs to be addressed most urgently</u>. 22.74% of respondents reported an issue with the way things are communicated by their departments, from last minute timetable changes, to changes in teaching. If this were addressed then perhaps the number of students dissatisfied with the options and modules process - 47.94% - would drop.

Students who approached the authors of this report with specific complaints were all joint honours students. This would imply that it is joint honours students who are feeling the most overlooked and who require the most attention. This further demonstrates the necessity of improved inter-departmental communication. Students were also often disappointed to find that the modules they had wanted to do were either full up or not running any more. It is essential to communicate to students whether popular modules will be running every year, and also how much space there will be on each module to avoid anger or disappointment.

The discussions with joint honours students also illuminated the need for the options selection process to open at 12 midday instead of 12 midnight. This could solve the issue of miscommunications between the Strategic Planning Office and the departments in uploading available modules; it could be resolved immediately rather than waiting until the next working day.

The recommendations provided below focus content communicated as well as timing and methods of communication.

Recommendations

1) Timing of Communication

Module content should be clearly communicated (via all available channels including email, the VLE, and meetings at the beginning of term) prior to and during enrollment - this will allow students to make fully-informed decisions about which modules to take

Availability of modules should be clearly communicated (via all available channels) prior to and during enrollment
- If possible, the exact number of spots available for each module should be advertised to students

2) Timing of Module Selection

For undergraduate students, the online module selection process on my.goldsmiths should open 12:00 mid-day, not 12:00 midnight.

3) Changes to modules

If departments make a change to a module, approval by the Quality Office should be completed as soon as possible, ideally a 1-2 day turnaround, and then communicated to students immediately

4) Communication of all options available

All modules and options available to students need to be communicated to them in plenty of time to be chosen.

Intercollegiate and inter-departmental options should be communicated to students before the departmental options, something already practiced by the History department.

5) Methods of communication

Departments should clearly communicate module options to students via email, the VLE, and in face-to-face meetings