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Research and innovation in flexible and distance teaching and learning

# **TEACHING AND RESEARCH AWARDS 2020-2021**

## **Learning Online with International Politics**

**Project team:** Sara Reimers, Geraldine Foley, Thomas Hanley, Peter Kogan, Sarah Ney and Jane Secker. Learning Enhancement and Development, City, University of London.

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## Activities and achievements

- *The project reported on students' experiences of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic*
- *It identified several areas that impact upon students' active engagement with online learning resources and asynchronous learning activities*
- *We made a number of recommendations for staff teaching online including:*
  - *the need for clarity when setting up and explaining learning activities to students,*
  - *the importance of referring to any asynchronous tasks in live teaching sessions and providing feedback*
  - *The importance of building a sense of community in teaching, by creating icebreaker and informal learning opportunities for students to get to know their peers and tutors*
  - *The benefits of quizzes or polls in live teaching to test students' understanding of key concepts*
  - *To introduce more authentic online learning based on scenarios and examples, problem-based learning alongside more innovative approaches drawing on playful learning.*

## Project Methodology

We undertook a web-based survey (using Qualtrics) of students' perceptions and preferences towards asynchronous learning resources and asynchronous individual and small group activities. This survey was open to all International Politics students (UG: n=677, PG n=91) in the School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS) at City, University of London.

We followed up the survey with focus groups with undergraduate students representing Y1, Y2 and Y3 and with postgraduate students. (UG: n=677, PG n=91). Our aim was to run at least five focus groups each with eight participants. We proposed to take a sample of students from across all programmes rather than isolating one programme. We offered a financial incentive for students to participate in the survey and focus groups in order to mitigate against selection bias and to encourage participants amongst our students who have work and / or caring commitments.

The project was overseen by Dr Jane Secker and Thomas Hanley, and the research team included Geraldine Foley, Peter Kogan, and Sarah Ney. Dr Sara Reimers analysed the survey responses and focus group discussions. The data analysis was undertaken using Excel for quantitative data, and Nvivo to facilitate the coding of the qualitative data.

## Literature Review

Our project was informed by several areas of educational research. The first area is that of active versus passive learning. Deslauriers et al. (2019), compared students' self-reported perception of learning with their actual learning on introductory college physics courses taught using 1) active instruction and 2) passive instruction (lectures by experienced and highly rated instructors). They found that when students experienced the increased cognitive effort associated with active learning, they often take that effort to signify poorer learning. This finding led the researchers to express the concern that this perceptual variance "may have a detrimental effect on students' motivation, engagement, and ability to self-regulate their own learning". Our project aimed to explore our students' perceptions and preferences in relation to both acquisitive learning resources (Laurillard, 2002) and more active asynchronous activities carried out either individually or in small groups. Using data gathered from Moodle, MS Teams and Office 365 we compared our students' perceptions and preferences in relation to asynchronous learning resources and activities with actual engagement.

The second area of educational research which informed our proposal is that of students' perceptions

and preferences in relation to individual work versus collaborative group work. Knight (2004) found that, given the choice, students would prefer to work independently. Much of the literature in this area suggests that the student experience of working collaboratively is often quite negative. Tucker and Abbasi (2016) highlight the most identified issues as: individuals not doing their fair share; difficulties with collaborative decision making; individual differences in personality; dealing with organisational issues and addressing team conflict. Robinson (2013) in a study of Psychology students studying in distance learning mode found that many students “experienced constraints and difficulty as a consequence of doing group work online”. Brown et al (2020), found that peer interaction did not play a significant role in student learning on distance programmes delivered by University of London Worldwide. Toetenel & Rienties (2016) found that Open University (OU) courses which involved significant amounts of group work negatively affected student satisfaction scores. Students expressed a clear preference for engaging with individual resources and activities. However, the number one predictor for engagement and attainment was whether students were working in groups. Students reported that they found group work difficult, but learning analytics data showed increased engagement where group activities were a major part of the module design. Our project explored the experience of our students with online individual and group work as their context is different to that of Toetenel & Rienties (2016) OU students and the distance learning Psychology students who participated in the Robinson (2013) study. We also looked at whether our students shared the preference OU students had for individual resources and activities and explored our students' experience of asynchronous group work. We also considered if the issues with group work set out by Tucker and Abbasi (2016) also affected our students and if our students preferred to work independently as Knight (2004) found, what the reasons might be for this choice.

Whilst City does have a learning analytics system it is relatively undeveloped compared to the Open University. However, we used data from Moodle, Microsoft Teams and Office365 to analyse patterns of engagement with group work across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. We further explored the initial student feedback (via module level surveys at Week 3) that Y2 and Y3 undergraduate students preferred to engage individually rather than collaboratively with the provided asynchronous resources and activities.

## What we did

This project examined students' experiences of learning online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing specifically on the 2020-2021 academic year, we surveyed students on the International Politics programmes at City, University of London. We received 83 responses from students to the survey. To accommodate student timetables, we conducted eight online focus groups via Teams which had between three and six participants. This meant we spoke to thirty students in total including both undergraduate and postgraduates. The focus groups were designed to provide rich qualitative data.

The project's aim was to explore the factors impacting on students' active engagement with online learning resources and asynchronous learning activities. The specific research question was: what are the different student perceptions and preferences in relation to actively engaging with asynchronous individual and collaborative online learning in International Politics undergraduate and postgraduate programmes?

## Project summary

This report provides a summary of the key findings from the survey and focus groups carried out with students in the Department of International Politics in spring 2021. The findings from the data and the following recommendations are primarily aimed at teaching staff in the Department of International Politics at City, University of London. As aspects of teaching continue online in 2021/2022 these findings should be useful for the current academic year. However, aspects of the recommendations may be more widely applicable for those teaching in other departments or beyond our university.

Additional analysis will be undertaken in 2022 to draw wider conclusions and a follow up report will be

circulated. However, the following recommendations have been drafted to help staff and point them to existing support and guidance.

Our findings from students suggest that staff teaching online should:

- Provide clear instructions and expectations when it comes to self-directed/independent learning, whether online or face-to-face, but even more so when learning takes place (mostly) online. Students mentioned a lack of clarity and how important the guidance of their lecturer was in the process. Also, a couple mentioned the positive aspect of learning to be more independent.
  - Continue using your department's Moodle template providing students with essential information. The [SASS Online Learning Portal](#) provides guidance on how to structure your Moodle page to include essential information and guidance for your students and provide opportunities for queries and support. For example, consider adding checklists or activity completion for each week to remind students of what they are expected to do and so that they can monitor their progress; using a Poll Everywhere question pinned onto the page to allow for anonymous questions to be submitted to the module.
  - Try and break up lecture recordings into shorter sections (15 minutes) and include external resources (YouTube videos/readings) in further reading.
- Refer to asynchronous activities in live teaching sessions (online or face to face) and provide students with feedback to encourage participation.
  - Section 6 of the SASS Online Learning Portal provides additional information on student engagement and support, specifically the examples from other modules at City.
  - This webpage from Imperial College provides guidance on [student access and motivation](#), including some tips on signposting, managing expectations, and providing guidance:
- Include activities and time/space for students to get to know each other and their lecturer when online as informal opportunities will be almost inexistent.
- Students correlated interaction with their peers and the lecturers with more effective and deeper learning. Activities should aim to build as much interaction as possible to maximise learning.
  - Section 4 of the SASS Online Learning Portal has information on student socialisation and community building, with examples from other modules at City
  - We have provided a number of [ideas for online icebreaker activities](#). Some can easily be adapted to fit your discipline/topic
  - Check out the active learning activities: [Small group teaching activities](#) and [Advance HE's Student engagement toolkit](#)
- Many survey respondents and survey participants highlighted the benefits of quizzes and polling both during and outside the live classes. They felt that they were useful to check understanding and progress and keep them engaged and motivated during synchronous sessions. They were seen as an effective way to link synchronous and asynchronous learning. Lecturers should aim to use them regularly and ensure that they are built to provide this continuity between independent and class work, whether online or face-to-face.
  - Some examples of [how to use Poll Everywhere to engage students](#) and encourage them to know each other and their teacher
  - This Moodle guidance has some useful [guidance and tips on best practice with quizzes](#)

- Some students commented on how certain types of activities were more engaging and efficient than others, for example activities including an element of playfulness or competition (eg quizzes, playing with some features of the virtual meeting), or replicating authentic learning situations (eg scenario-based learning). Lecturers should aim to include them in the design of their module/lessons, whether online or face-to-face.
  - Colleagues in the Journalism department have been using a scenario-based learning structure with their online Media Law module and inviting guests to make their teaching more authentic.
  - Watch this presentation on [experiential learning activities](#) by colleague Sara Jones at Bayes Business School
  - Colleagues from Psychology have been using playful learning in their teaching online and face-to-face.
  - Check this recording of LEaD colleague Kathryn Drumm on an example of [using OneNote for playful learning](#)

These recommendations should be useful to designing and adapting your teaching for online and blended learning.

## Dissemination

The project team plan to present their findings at the RIDE Conference in 2022. They have also submitted a paper to present at Inted 2022 in Valencia in March 2022. The team are currently exploring publication options and plan to submit an academic journal article in spring 2022.

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