

Proposal to the Learning and Teaching Development Fund April 2010.

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"Effects of third subjects on the student's experience"

If changes to student support with the aim of improving pass rates on a first year course extract significantly greater amounts of time, effort and attention might this backfire by reducing students' performance on their other two subjects? How do students distribute their effort between their courses, and what effect does this have? We have not been able to find publications or internal reports on this topic. We have however carried out a large pilot study (including 130 questionnaire responses) as a student project. Broadly speaking there is great diversity here: students who are fully satisfied, students who say they would have dropped out if not for the ability to switch subjects afforded by our first year, others who say they hated being forced to do a third subject of no interest and it nearly made them drop out.

However most students seem to make a choice of third subject with little thought (69% in our pilot sample), and many (39%) are not even aware they will have to choose other subjects when they come to the University of Glasgow (UoG). This is important since the faculty system should be supporting key principles in the L&T Strategy: Access and opportunity, and Equality and diversity. Choosing a degree with no established job path can be a relatively risky choice for a First Generation University student. Keeping avenues open by selecting a more esoteric third subject could be an exciting but low stakes alternative path. Similarly, it could be easier to tempt under-represented groups e.g. females into subjects via the third subject route.

This project will investigate student attitudes and experiences of doing three subjects, correcting problems of method in the pilot study. It will also develop and trial ways of presenting the choices a student must make, given their declared honours subject.

2. Aims and Outcomes

2.1 Specific aims

1. To understand much better how Third subjects affect student enjoyment, allocation of effort, and performance.
2. To understand how, and how often, this impacts subject changes and retention, both positively and negatively.
3. To establish the main different ways students choose Third subjects. (The pilot indicated that some choose only novel subjects, some choose only subjects because they are familiar from school, some perceive interdisciplinary synergy, some are narrowly focussed on their Honours subject.)
4. To design, implement, and test a tool to present subject choices to applicants given their intending honours choice.

2.2 Outcomes

A report on findings from our survey and database investigation.

A tested prototype for presenting course choices to first year students, given their intending honours subject.

2.3 Bid evaluation criteria

1) Linkage to the Learning and Teaching Strategy: the project outcomes contribute to two of the strategic objective themes: ‘*Shaping the University Learning Community*’ and ‘*Enhancing the Student Experience*’. An informed curriculum choice whereby all students are aware of all possible subject choices will help the UoG move towards a ‘*truly culturally diverse learning community with more students studying a wider variety of disciplines*’. Students who fully ‘own’ and ‘control’ their degrees will have the best possible university experience. From their first day on campus students should feel empowered and in control of their future. Currently students are inducted into the University on the basis of their intending degree, yet we assume that they are prepared academically for all of their subject choices. Anecdotally many students have told us that their unpreparedness resulted in a stressful or disappointing initial adviser meeting. We are confident that the outcomes of our project will result in a dramatic increase in the number of students whose very first academic interaction is, in contrast, perceived as a positive and memorable experience. The performance indicators ‘Student Experience through surveys’, ‘International study experiences of students’, ‘HESA performance indicators for Widening Participation’, ‘Retention statistics’ and ‘Year 1 continuation rates’ could be used as indicators of the success of this project.

2) Innovations to the learning experience: better information (and so better choice processes) should reduce bad and increase good experiences of Third subjects. By Freshers’ Week the student will be fully prepared for what is coming up in their courses and will be much less likely to spend valuable time and effort in the first months wondering whether they have made the right choice.

3) Demonstration of measurable outcomes – see below under ‘Evaluation’.

4) This project will integrate seamlessly into existing learning and teaching practice. It is about making the existing system of faculty entrance, a variety of first year subjects, and the Advisor system work better. The only change would be in how to present information more successfully to accepted applicants.

5) If successful, and once rolled out throughout the University, the presentation of student choice information will be straightforward to sustain as a standard element of the prospectus publication process.

6) Transferability - see below under ‘Potential Applicability / Transferability’

3. Previous Work

The need for this project became apparent as Lorna’s role as Study Support Co-Ordinator for FIMS developed. Recently we have worried that retention motivated initiatives may unintentionally harm weaker students by diverting their effort away from their performance in other modules. We have also become aware that while the choice of degree is generally formed over years, many students decide on the remainder of their Level 1 curriculum in a very short time frame.

We decided to look at the process of an application to UoG through the eyes of school leavers. Bearing in mind that they may be a First Generation University student, may have applied to more than one university and remained aware that their peers may be applying for inflexible degrees at UoG or elsewhere, we trawled through the on-line prospectuses of Scottish Universities. The quality of the information contained therein varies dramatically between institutions. While UoG’s traditional faculty entry system is explained thoroughly, for a school leaver unfamiliar with entry systems the information contained within the section entitled ‘Degree programmes A..Z’ relating to the First Year can appear confusing.

We searched for published literature in the area of third subject choice but failed to find anything of relevance. We asked around for access to internal UoG documents but came to the conclusion that no major internal studies looking at this had been performed. It was at this point that we designed and ran

the pilot study described in the summary section as a student psychology project, using as participants psychology, maths and computing students. The strongly contrasting disciplinary styles within this sample gives us some reason to expect the broad findings may apply widely.

4. Methodology

For the investigation into student attitudes and experiences of doing three subjects the method that we intend to use is as follows. We will use an online questionnaire tool to survey a large number of mainly Level 1 students. (The fore-runner pilot questionnaire may be seen at <http://thirdsubject.questionpro.com/>) We will request consent from them to link their BIQuery data to their responses. This is important for seeing how much being chosen as a first or third subject interacts with (normalised) performance on the course and with time spent on, and enjoyment of, the course.

We also plan to conduct focus groups and interviews with a smaller group of students and to recruit some participants to maintain time diaries in order for us to estimate the relative effort they put into studying for their various modules. Additionally we will conduct focus groups with students who have actually switched degree courses and are in effect doing a second First Year. These students, as opposed to those who have completely ‘dropped-out’ of UoG, are accessible to us, and despite not successfully completing their original Level 1 curriculum have been motivated enough to persist as a University student. This will give us a second angle on how much third subjects play a part in this, both positively and negatively.

For the second part of the project – the creation of a useful tool to assist students in making an informed curriculum choice – the pilot study has already indicated that it has to adapt to students who are focussed on a fixed honours subject, those who are rather uncommitted and focussed on opening up choices of honours; those who should be told that changing faculties might be crucial to securing the combination they want, those who need to be warned that choices the university advertised in one place are in fact not available due to timetable clashes.

We envisage a sequence of the following, using HCI design methods and employing both computing and psychology summer studentships. Gathering existing information available to UoG applicants on third subject choice; organisation of this information into a useful, well structured format; and finally the design, implementation, and testing of a paper-based and/or interactive electronic prototype tool. This would be followed up by a pilot of the resultant tool with existing Level 1 or Level 2 students. This year Lorna is co-ordinating the delivery of both Pre-Induction materials and the process of Induction to the new FIMS students so is in a position to use the new tool with real UoG applicants should the it be successfully completed over the summer months.

5.Potential Applicability / Transferability

Eventually we would like to see the guide to choosing Level 1 curricula rolled out as an integral part of routine documentation. Although aimed primarily at UoG Undergraduate applicants we can also envisage the guide being of value to both Advisers of Studies and staff involved with recruitment events.

6.Evaluation

Evaluation of the investigative part of the project will consist of collected feedback from advisors, HODs etc. on how useful our report appears to them.

Evaluation of the information tool will be from its testing on students, and from advisors as to whether they have noticed students arriving at the initial meetings more prepared.

7. Timetable

- July - September 2010. Two summer students (one Psychology, one Computing Science) developing and piloting ways of presenting the choice a student must make. Milestone: Prototype of student choice tool – paper based and/or electronic.
- September 2010 – February 2011. Two person months of a Psychology Research Assistant administering a survey to measure student's attitudes to their subject choices. The two months will be spread over this time period although the majority of the work would take place in Semester 1. Milestone: documented survey results.
- December 2010 – April 2011. One person month of systematic BIQuery database work linking the results of the survey to student marks. The majority of this work will be spread over Semester 2, once the survey results are complete. We expect to identify an existing employee on a temporary contract and negotiate with their current line manager to extend that contract. Milestone: report of links discovered between database investigation and survey results.

8. Budget

• 2 x 10 week summer students (one Computing Science and one Psychology) @ £250/week. Total of £5000

• Two person months of a Psychology Research Assistant. Grade 6, spine point 26. Salary costs = £4420.5 (2/12 x 26,523), Superannuation costs = £972.50 (2/12 x 5,835), N.I. costs = 311.50 (2/12 of £1,869). Total = £5,704.50

• Three person weeks of an existing member of UoG staff. Grade 7, spine point 34. Salary costs = £1938.46 (3/52 x 33,600), Superannuation costs = £426.46 (3/52 x 7,392), N.I. costs = £144.98 (3/52 x £2,513). Total = £2509.90

• £1000 under the heading 'Consumables'. This will be used to contribute to towards I.T. and office costs for the Research Assistants, mounting a large survey, and to paying participants (e.g. of the time diary sub-study).

This comes to a total of request for **£14,214.40**. No other sources of funding are currently being used to support this work.

9. Approval

Should this application be successful and granted funding, we give consent for this application to be published on the Learning and Teaching website.

We will be applying to the FIMS Ethics Committee for approval, based on standard approaches to gaining informed consent for surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

10. Signature of Project Leader

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