Health Sciences: managing diversity

Kate Giles looks at how the Department of Health Sciences handles a large and diverse student intake, through small group teaching, skills training, innovative facilities and placements.

The first thing to strike me on my visit to the Department of Health Sciences was the sheer scale and diversity of its student population. Formed in 2001 through a merger of the Departments of Health Studies and Health Sciences and Clinical Evaluation, the new Department offers four undergraduate and five postgraduate teaching programmes. These include pre- and post-registration nursing and midwifery programmes, the BSc in Health Sciences, and postgraduate qualifications such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Claims Handling and Clinical Risk Management and the MSc in Health Services Research. There are two intakes of approximately 140 students per year, who range from fresh-faced 19-year-olds to mid-career professionals, many of whom are pursuing their studies part-time.

Small group teaching

The Department therefore faces the challenge of providing its students with a sense of cohesion. Heather Cahill, Chair of the Board of Studies, explains that like other departments, Health Sciences makes extensive use of small group teaching as a means of breaking up large cohorts of students into smaller, more manageable groups. But within these groups, students are also expected to offer each other a level of mutual support and trust which enables them to tackle difficult and emotive issues relating to healthcare.

One technique which Heather uses to facilitate this in her Ethics module is a ‘hill-top viewing’ exercise. Students are asked to imagine an ethical issue as a landscape, surrounded by a

(continued on page 2)
IT and study skills

Another challenge faced by the Department as a result of its heterogeneity is the variety in IT and study skills experience within any one student intake. Dr Fiona Fylan explains that the first 15 weeks of the undergraduate Diploma are concerned with ‘access’ study, providing students with the necessary skills for studying in higher education. BSc students too take an introductory module in study and research skills, covering everything from taking effective lecture notes to developing experimental hypotheses.

Ian Cole, Lecturer in ICT, has developed various strategies to tailor IT teaching to the range of abilities within the student body. A simple but highly effective means of assessing IT ability in the first instance is a paper-based questionnaire, which enables staff rapidly to identify those students who require help with basic skills. As part of an MA project researching post-registration students, Ian has also developed a series of five optional computer-based tutorials, covering skills such as the use of the keyboard, the mouse and Windows software, which are reinforced by more advanced internet and email tutorials. The advantage of such a system is that it allows students to explore and develop such skills at their own pace. Like much of the Department’s teaching, the fact that such activities are task-orientated provides students with the motivation to see the exercises through successfully. Ian stresses that laying the foundations of such key skills effectively also enables students to be more confident about developing IT applications in research or in practice on the ward.

Innovative teaching facilities

IT is also used to teach healthcare skills which need to be practised repetitively, adapting them to different case studies. Ian Cole and Alison Foster’s Critical Care Simulation Scenarios project, funded by the Teaching Innovation and Development Committee, is designed to encourage students to learn the basic skills of diagnosing and treating clinical shock, through an interactive software package on which students can practice as often as they like.

The Department’s largest teaching facility is its new home, the Seeboum Rowntree building. Staff emphasise how much they appreciate the flexibility of the new accommodation as teaching spaces: rooms can easily be converted from lecture to seminar format, facilitating small group work as well as presentations within the same session. A model for the rest of the University to aspire to, no doubt.

The building also houses the Department’s Simulation Ward: a mock-up of a hospital ward, inhabited by two patients or ‘SimMen’. These are sophisticated life-size dummies which can be programmed to simulate a wide variety of medical problems. Students are asked to diagnose their condition and prescribe treatment. Their decisions are then programmed into the SimMen – and a number of procedures, such as injections, can be practised on the dummies directly. The effects are then observed: the dummies are even able to utter a series of life-like groans if a mistake has been made.

Placements

One of the areas of particular concern in a vocationally-driven department such as Health Sciences is providing students with experience of practice. Whilst vital for the development of the students, setting up and monitoring placements can be time-consuming and problematic. Each placement therefore receives an annual educational audit by a Link Lecturer, who assesses every aspect of the learning environment, from health and safety to learning resources and student support. As Sue Ford, the Practice Experience Co-ordinator, emphasises: “Our procedures may seem rigid and formal, but at the end of the day they are necessary in order to be able to sign students off.” The Link Lecturer also provides a contact point for all students on the placement and, where possible, visits students on site.

Another challenge for placement provision is to ensure that students are aware of its intended learning outcomes, especially where these relate to formative assessment. The Department has addressed this by creating a portfolio with learning outcomes specific to each branch of nursing. Students are required to provide evidence for each learning outcome, which can take a variety of forms, including direct observation by their practice supervisor, reflective writing and question and answer exercises.

The Department would be happy to receive enquiries about any of the areas covered in this article. Please see the contact details below.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Role</th>
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<tr>
<td>Heather Cahill</td>
<td>ext 1658; email hac2</td>
<td>(small group teaching)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiona Fylan</td>
<td>ext 1380; email ff3</td>
<td>(study skills)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ian Cole</td>
<td>ext 1654; email ijc4 (IT)</td>
<td>(teaching facilities)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alison Foster</td>
<td>ext 1676; email afl1 (teaching facilities)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sue Ford</td>
<td>ext 1399; email sf17</td>
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Editorial: evaluating Forum

It is one year since the first issue of Forum appeared, and during the summer an evaluation of the newsletter was carried out to discover how it has been received amongst teaching staff. Dr Sylvia Hogarth from the Department of Educational Studies collected responses from 35 members of teaching staff, both full-time and part-time, and including postgraduates who teach. Her evaluation report is available on the Forum website, at www.york.ac.uk/felt/forum/evaluation.htm.

The study found that Forum readership varies widely – from thoroughly-read to not read at all – and that there are some distribution problems, especially to postgraduates who teach. So far, only a small number of staff say it has had a direct effect on their teaching, but several felt it had encouraged them to be more reflective. There was a positive reception for many of Forum’s features, and useful suggestions were made for how the newsletter could be improved.

None of these findings is surprising for a newsletter that has existed for just one year, and we will respond to the evaluation findings wherever we are able. One suggestion was that the emphasis on departments should be supplemented from time to time with topical articles looking at a theme that runs across departments. In this issue we have the first themed article, which looks at how departments tackle the collection of student feedback: there is a variety of practice around the University, and we hope that, as with all Forum articles, you will find some helpful ideas.

Professor John Holman
Chair of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

News

Dates for your diary

The Research/Teaching Interface: a joint YCAP/Forum workshop
9 January 2004, 12-3pm, Room H/G21

This event is designed to encourage staff to talk about their research to colleagues from different disciplines and to explore the interface between their research and their teaching. Short presentations will be accompanied by discussions over lunch.

Anyone interested in offering a short summary of an aspect of their research and of how it is used in teaching is invited to contact Sue Grace (ext 4853; email sg10). For further information, including how to book a place, please see www.york.ac.uk/admin/sdo/wrkshops/ycap011.htm

University of York Annual Learning and Teaching Conference 2004
12 May 2004, 12.30-5.30pm, Exhibition Area, Physics/Electronics Building

All members of staff involved in learning and teaching are warmly invited to attend this Conference, which is being organised by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. The centrepiece will be an inaugural Annual Learning and Teaching Lecture, followed by a drinks reception. The afternoon’s events will also include a poster display illustrating current teaching enhancement projects at York, accompanied by a buffet lunch, and two workshop sessions looking at ‘hot topics’ in learning and teaching, including online learning.

Further information will be available after Christmas via the Forum website, but please put the date in your diary now.

Forum goes online

You can now access information about the Forum and its work at www.york.ac.uk/felt. Electronic copies of Forum past and present are available online, as are further examples of good practice which cannot be included in the newsletter for reasons of space. This ‘good practice resource’ currently includes the Teaching Committee Good Practice Guide 2002/03: a digest of departmental practices in learning and teaching commended by the University Teaching Committee during the past academic year. Ideas range from strategies for student support and guidance, to initiatives to develop transferable skills.

We would be interested to know your views on the website as it develops: please contact Alice Wakely (ext 2018; email aw21).

Interested in finding out more about learning and teaching practices in other departments?

The University’s Teaching Committee is looking for a number of ‘associate members’ to join panels engaged in reviews of departments’ taught programmes. Associate members need to:

• have a keen interest in learning and teaching matters: experience as a Chair of Board of Studies or of a departmental Teaching Committee or similar would be helpful;
• be prepared to be involved in two reviews over a three-year period;
• have the support of their Head of Department.

Associate membership is intended to broaden the base of those involved in the work of the University’s Teaching Committee, and give a wider range of staff the opportunity to share ideas across departments. Anyone interested should contact Alison Kennell, Secretary to Teaching Committee (ext 2154; email ajk8) or Bruce Gilbert, Chair of Teaching Committee (ext 4586; email bcg1).

National Teaching Fellowship Scheme to be expanded

The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) has just announced that the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme will be expanded to more than double its previous size for 2004. Fellowships worth £50,000 will be awarded in three categories: experienced staff who have been teaching for more than six years, ‘rising stars’ who are relatively new to teaching, and learning support staff. Further details will be circulated to departments as soon as they are available.
Mathematics: chalk and computers

Nigel Lowe looks at teaching delivery methods, including computer-assisted learning and assessment, in the Department of Mathematics.

Most of the teaching in the Department of Mathematics is unashamedly ‘chalk and talk’, despite today’s fashions for teaching by transparency and lecturing by laptop. Whilst technology is used where appropriate, outgoing Chair of the Board of Studies Dr Chris Wood says that the Department has come to celebrate the absence of technological gimmicks. Its conviction (shared by most UK Mathematics departments) is that the traditional approach promotes intellectual involvement, and illustrates an important part of a mathematician’s modus operandi. Mathematics is about writing things down in real time, manipulating algebraic expressions, recognising their characteristics, even just playing around until something clicks into place. Little of this process is portrayed adequately by pre-prepared overheads or Powerpoint, so blackboards, covered in dense hieroglyphics, thrive.

Linking teaching and research

The programme content, however, is anything but old-fashioned, in particular the second year Recent Advances in Mathematics module, described by Chris Wood as “quite radical for an undergraduate Maths degree”. It is easy to imagine that the intellectual leap from the rigorous, analytical background of the subject to the creativity of research is especially challenging in Mathematics. In the Recent Advances in Mathematics module, staff take turns delivering material relating to their specialist areas, demonstrating the diversity of topics and introducing the culture of research. This then acts as preparation for the projects which students undertake in their third or fourth years.

Developing transferable skills

The projects also provide students with the opportunity to write about Mathematics, confounding the assumption that they will barely have strung a sentence together during the programme. Preparation is provided in the form of a Mathematical Writing module. Students on the four-year MMath programme must also give a 20-minute presentation on their research topic. Preparation for this has been developed by Dr Sandra Pott, as part of her YCAP project. Students receive written materials and a short talk on particular techniques for presenting mathematical topics effectively to non-experts. They then deliver a run-through of their project presentation to a group of five peers and their tutor, receiving feedback on anonymised evaluation questionnaires. This experience is ideal preparation for the working lives of Mathematics graduates in industry, finance and research, where the audience is usually unfamiliar with specific mathematical techniques.

Undergraduate induction

The Department also pays particular attention to the beginning of the students’ undergraduate careers. During the first term of the first year there are tutorials, held in pairs with a supervising tutor, and ‘drop-in’ evening classes run by a tutor and a postgraduate student, focusing on problem sheets. All students are expected to attend one evening class per fortnight. The Department also arranges targeted back-up classes, aimed at students with less advanced mathematical backgrounds. The emphasis at this stage is on bringing all new students up to speed, allowing for different entry standards.

After the first term, support for lecture courses is provided by seminars. These might involve 12 to 20 students working with a staff member or postgraduate. The latter play an important role in seminar teaching, as the Department finds that undergraduates are more willing to contribute when seminars are run by a more junior figure. Coaxing contributions out of students is an important feature of the seminars, which provide opportunities for teamwork and presenting material at the blackboard. No student is forced to contribute, but the Department’s philosophy is to try to develop students’ confidence: as Admissions Tutor Dr Terence Jackson puts it: “An important thing in teaching is not just to give facts but confidence - confidence to make mistakes.”

Computer-aided learning and assessment

No undergraduate Mathematics programme can afford to ignore the importance of computers, which are central to many areas of the subject. But the Department has also used computers to aid the actual learning process, ever since Terence Jackson’s introduction of computer-aided learning (CAL) of number theory in 1984. Most recently, Dr Gustav Delius has been awarded funding by the Teaching Innovation and Development Committee to develop computer-based materials which aid learning through assessment. The materials are based on freeware known as AIM (Assessment In Mathematics), built around the Maple Symbolic Mathematics program, giving the system a built-in understanding of Mathematics.

CAL can do much more than just save marking time, although this is a major benefit for the Department: time previously spent marking is now invested more productively in the delivery of
seminars. As with other CAL systems, the learning opportunities can be enhanced significantly by the way in which the material is used. The system includes the facility to randomise questions for different users, detect correct answers given in unusual forms, log individual student performance and provide intelligently-tailored feedback.

Homework assignments are set up so that students can keep trying until they get the right answer, with only a small penalty for each repeated attempt. Plagiarism is prohibitively curtailed because the program produces specific questions for individual users. Gustav Delius admits that he has yet to exploit fully the feedback options to help users understand why their answer may be in error; however, immediate feedback of a simple ‘right or wrong’ nature is a huge bonus. The idea is to encourage engagement with the problem so that the student can gain understanding and satisfaction from completing it, rather than presenting a model answer, which can often gloss over significant learning points.

The system is equally flexible in a classroom setting. During a typical session using the Maple program, formative assessment through timed tests provides immediate on-screen diagnostic information for the tutor, revealing where the problems are.

Gustav initially used the system in support of his own lecture course, but its success has been shared with colleagues, and there are plans to exploit the system more widely, including using it to supplement the back-up classes currently run for first year students. He is happy to talk to any of the considerable number of departments who teach aspects of Mathematics to their students, and help them adapt the AIM system to their needs.

For more information on any of the topics covered in this article, please contact:
Chris Wood – ext 3073; email cmw4 (research projects)
Sandra Pott – ext 4160; email sp23 (student presentations)
Terence Jackson – ext 3080; email thj1 (first year teaching)
Gustav Delius – ext 3077; email gwd2 (computer-aided learning)

How I use my research in my teaching

Sarah Collins, Health Sciences and Sociology

Sarah Collins’ research is in the field of communication and thus relates directly to teaching itself.

Our own communication is possibly the greatest learning and teaching resource we have. Pivotal learning moments come from communication. Teachers know the fruitfulness of reflective space: a space which allows us to see that what a student needs most is time to go away and think; or which allows students to show us that their understanding is greater than we had apprehended. When a student becomes visibly and audibly stuck and lost for words, it is how we help them move beyond that point that can be most educative.

My early experiences of teaching in Sudan introduced me to the value of communication long before I came to research it. I found myself teaching classes of 70 students with diverse abilities, sharing desks and books in rooms too small to house us. I became increasingly dependent on my own communication skills, combining learning by rote with various techniques to maximise the potential of my voice and those of my students.

The communication I began to use in my early teaching is now greatly enhanced by the knowledge acquired through my research:

• I use sequencing rules in communication to design materials and plan sessions, pace the presentation of a new concept, and to be responsive to students’ learning moment by moment.
• I can recognise and exploit the communication opportunities generated by varying learning environments and teaching techniques.
• My most certain and immediate route to gauging a student’s level of understanding, motivation and enthusiasm is through communication.
• By sustaining a communicative distance between students’ understanding of a subject and my teaching, I can stretch students’ thinking and encourage them to make connections for themselves.

My research also supplies me with a rich teaching resource through my interviews with patients and health professionals. Imagine the awkwardness of my first meeting with a man who has just heard that he has cancer, and has decided he would rather not be alive. I am left with a sense of the clumsiness of my questions, of treading in places where I am not sure I have a right to go. Using experiences like this can help to prepare undergraduates in the health professions for their early encounters with patients. These experiences also help me, in my teaching with practising health professionals, to identify with the communication challenges they face in their work.

My communication research and teaching act in synergy. Teaching applications of technology and multimedia in communication research have inspired new techniques for data analysis. Our most recent research identified a host of distinctive features and qualities in a comparison of nurses’ and doctors’ communication with patients. These findings and their comparative dimensions could be developed in inter-professional teaching: nurses and doctors could learn about the qualities in one another’s communication, and in parallel, could learn how to develop the potential and distinctiveness of their own.

Sarah Collins’ research involves Sociology, Health Sciences and Linguistics, and she is currently contributing to teaching and curriculum development in Health Sciences and the Medical School. If you would like to find out more about her work, contact her on ext 13304736; email sfc1.
In depth: student feedback

HEFCE’s plan for a National Student Survey in 2004 has brought the subject of student feedback to the fore in recent months. Here we look at some of the issues faced by departments in this area, and how they are being tackled across campus.

Student feedback forms play a central role for departments in their reviews of taught programmes. Each department faces the same challenge: to encourage students to use the opportunity to make thoughtful and constructive comments. For this to happen, it is essential that the students themselves have confidence in the feedback system. A survey of student representatives carried out by the online feedback development group in 2001 identified their two main concerns: ‘closing the loop’ and anonymity.

Closing the loop

According to the students, the best way of getting full and meaningful feedback is if they feel that their feedback is valued, and that it is not “just an administrative game being played”. “If students see they are being heard, they are more likely to submit forms,” one commented.

The message is clear: departments need to ‘close the loop’ — to let the students know what has happened to the comments they have made. Departments have traditionally relied upon the presence of Boards of Studies representatives at meetings, but in recent years, the University Teaching Committee has been recommending that departments should be more pro-active. Many display a copy of relevant Boards of Studies minutes on the departmental noticeboard, and some provide a digest of comments and responses. This year, the Sociology Board of Studies representatives have developed an electronic noticeboard of their own to report back to their peers. The Department of Computer Science operates an online archive of open committee minutes, with a list of key points on the Department’s main information webpages.

Other departments such as Educational Studies actively report back to their students in class time. The Department of Mathematics in particular makes use of a short questionnaire at the mid-point of a module to ensure all is proceeding smoothly: the lecturer compiles the results and presents them along with a response the following week. In the Department of Language and Linguistics, tutors explain at the start of a module how feedback from previous cohorts of students has shaped the current module design, thus embedding a sense of valuing student feedback from the beginning.

Staff confidentiality

Of course, the need to close the loop to students must also take into account staff confidentiality and morale. Departments such as History, Philosophy and Psychology strike a balance whereby the Head of Department or equivalent discusses the detailed content of forms with the member of staff concerned, and the Board of Studies or equivalent receives a summary. The design of feedback forms also affects this issue: questions on whether learning outcomes were met provide a broader focus for Boards of Studies’ discussions, rather than just asking for comments on the individual performance of lecturers.

Student anonymity

Students have their own concerns regarding the confidentiality of their comments: it was clear from the 2001 survey that they want the option to make criticisms anonymously. Departmental approaches to this issue vary. Many operate entirely anonymous systems; however, other departments such as Physics and English give their students the option of signing their forms. The reasoning behind it is that students should be expected to take responsibility for their comments; such a system also allows lecturers to contact students to discuss issues further. Students also see the benefits of this approach: “not being anonymous encourages me to make constructive comments rather than purely critical ones,” said one.

Whatever approach a department adopts, it is essential that the students understand it, and do not feel constrained to hold back their views. The students stressed that it was important to preserve anonymity when forms are collected in: “We may not be critical enough if handing sheets back to tutors.” In the Departments of Archaeology and History, the tutor leaves the room whilst students fill in the forms, and the Board of Studies representatives then deliver the forms to the departmental office in a sealed envelope.

Response rates

Another factor which affects the usefulness of student feedback is the response rate: an issue highlighted recently with the advent of the online feedback system. Despite features to encourage students to complete forms.
Questionnaire design

We reviewed the forms currently used by departments. The following practices were particularly notable.

**Layout**

- Including a summary of the module and its aims at the head of the form (Biology).
- Including a picture of the lecturer on the feedback form (Biology; History of Art).

**Sample questions**

- “Are there things which you would recommend that we don’t change?” (Language and Linguistics).
- “Did the teaching include the member of staff’s research?” (Archaeology).
- “Did the lecturer use unfamiliar terms with inadequate explanation?” (Chemistry).
- Questions which translate the jargon eg “The tutor provides helpful, sufficient and prompt feedback The tutor keeps me informed about how I’m doing” (Economics).
- Asking the students to evaluate their own contributions to the learning process eg hours worked out of contact time; number of essays completed and punctuality; participation in classes and seminars; asking for help; percentage of lectures attended.
- The students surveyed by the online feedback group said that they liked to have the opportunity to make freeform comments as well as replying to short tickbox questions.

Beyond feedback forms

There are many other ways of gathering students’ views. Besides Boards of Studies representatives, many departments also operate staff-student committees: in the Department of Computer Science, the staff and student representatives are paired up to allow day-to-day monitoring of the cohort’s experiences. Open meetings for cohorts are also widespread: MA students in the Department of Language and Linguistics have fortnightly meetings with the MA Co-ordinator.

The national context

HEFCE is expected to take a lead in relation to these and other issues when it launches the National Student Survey next year. At the time of writing, the results of the recent pilot are expected shortly, at which point institutions will be invited to comment on plans for the final implementation. A good practice guide on the use of internal student feedback is also expected from HEFCE before Christmas.

Over this academic year, the University Teaching Committee will be reviewing York’s Policy on Monitoring Teaching, and will take account of these developments. Departments will be contacted once proposals have been drafted.

Further reading


For further information on the online feedback system, see www.york.ac.uk/systems/feedback/info.cfm
Continuing Education: community spirit

Russell Yates visited the Centre for Continuing Education to find out about its generic areas of specialism: meeting the needs of mature students and establishing links with the community.

Located within the Registrar’s Department, the Centre for Continuing Education runs a number of non-accredited courses in areas such as History and the Arts, and also offers an accredited Certificate in Continuing Education with strands in the Humanities, History and Local History. The teaching is undertaken by part-time tutors, a number of whom studied for their second degrees at York, and the Centre’s work is co-ordinated by Manager Lesley Booth. The majority of its students are mature learners, many of whom have not studied for some time and are academically under-confident.

Mature learners

Most students on Continuing Education programmes are highly motivated, but at the same time have more barriers to learning than typical undergraduates, such as financial and personal commitments. They have often been out of formal learning for many years and come to the teaching sessions at the end of a working day. However, the tutors strongly believe that “almost anyone can study at Level One”, and have an open access policy where no previous qualification is required. The Centre has developed a particular approach to programme delivery in response to its students’ needs. As many of the students are not used to independent study, the programmes themselves involve much more contact time than in other departments (22 hours per 10 credits), with a 75% attendance requirement. The Centre is as flexible as possible in acknowledgement of the students’ other commitments, and has developed detailed procedures for dealing with extension requests.

Teaching sessions are delivered in groups no larger than 15, and have three elements to them: building the students’ confidence and tackling emotional learning barriers, developing the students’ generic study skills, and delivering the module content. The students themselves play a significant part in the first of these, forming strong support networks with their peers which extend beyond the classroom. The Centre invests particular effort in its study skills provision, and with the help of Teaching Innovation and Development Committee funding has produced some online study skills guidance. Although written with the Centre’s own students in mind, the material is generic and could be of benefit to other students in the University. It can be found at [www.york.ac.uk/inst/ccc/ccc.yku/studyskillshub.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/ccc/ccc.yku/studyskillshub.htm).

One of the ways in which the Centre would like to develop its provision in response to its students’ particular needs would be to set up ‘book boxes’ – boxes of course-specific texts which tutors would take to seminars for students to borrow. Students already need to make the trip once a week to the seminars at King’s Manor, and a further trip up to the J B Morrell Library can present another barrier to their achievements. However, as the Centre funds itself through its programme fees, initiatives such as this have to be balanced against keeping the programmes accessible. Colleagues can certainly help in this respect: if you have any review copies of books which you do not need, the Centre would be very glad of them.

Outreach to the community

The Centre for Continuing Education is very keen to establish links between the University and the local community. Some potential students are discouraged by their view of the University as an ivory tower outside the city where they do not belong. To overcome this, the Centre aims to run ‘picnic seminars’, bringing potential Continuing Education students in by bus to show them what University life could be like. Staff already participate in the York Learning Festival, and work with the organisation Future Prospects.

A more radical proposal is for the Centre to take its programmes into the community, delivering them in situ. Again, the limiting factor is funding, balancing costs against access – a difficult task when the exercise itself is a form of marketing. Helped by a Teaching Innovation and Development Committee grant, the Centre recently delivered a ten-week History programme based at Tang Hall Primary School. The project opened up university study to the seven students who enrolled, and gathered valuable insights about educational access and attitudinal barriers in marginalized groups.

National recognition

The Centre is particularly proud of one of its students, Sandra Wadley, a midday supervisor from a school in Acomb, who has won an Adult Learners Award from the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education. Sandra left school at 14 with no qualifications. Although she has always loved History she was terrified of the whole idea of studying and what the assessment involved. With the support of her tutors, Sandra became one of the first group of Continuing Education students to complete their studies this summer.

For further information on the work of the Centre for Continuing Education, please contact Iain Barr, Courses Administrator – ext 4620; email ijb3.
An alumnus remembers . . .

Dr Christopher Ridgway, now the Curator of Castle Howard, describes his most memorable experiences of teaching as a student at York.

"I recall seminars and tutorials as the backbone of my undergraduate course. Learning to speak in front of others and to listen to differing opinions were amongst the great benefits of the York system. The English Department encouraged this experience of thinking aloud.

When I was a postgraduate, my supervisor exercised an attention to detail that was at times humiliating, and I could leave his office feeling only a few inches high. It might have seemed severe at the time, but it was a very positive experience, for he taught me the delights and disciplines of writing as a way of thinking. In my professional life, I can honestly say that hardly a week goes by when I do not have cause to be grateful for the quality of his scrutiny and supervision."

The students had a realistic approach to what they could expect in terms of feedback. In an ideal world, every tutor would give every student a one-to-one session on every assignment – but the students acknowledged that in reality, it is a matter of making the best use of a tutor’s limited time.

Be specific!

Given this limitation, the students made suggestions about the kind of feedback they find most useful. “What we really want to know is: what was good, what was bad, and how we can improve. The last one is the most important.”

What was good, what was bad, and how we can improve

They also stressed the importance of specificity in this respect, detecting a tendency for tutors to provide detailed feedback to ‘hone up’ a good piece of work, rather than targeting specific comments at more basic improvements. “Comments like ‘more information needed’ or ‘expand this’ are not very helpful if you don’t know what you are looking for or where to find it. Giving the name of an author or an article points you in the right direction.”

The students felt that detailed feedback gave them the incentive to work at a particular area: “If I’m overwhelmed by work, and I get back an assessment with a bad grade and no comment, I’ll just put it to one side and get on with the more recent stuff; whereas if I have specific suggestions to follow up, I feel that improvement is more within my grasp.”

Even more useful are comments which indicate the scale of improvement possible, such as: “This was a 2:1, but if you had included a bibliography, it would have been a First.” The students disliked being referred to generic grade descriptors such as ‘shows in-depth understanding’ or ‘displays critical awareness’, which they found too vague.

Proformas

Feedback using a standard proforma was considered a helpful way of focusing on the important components of an assessment. Again, however, the key to useful feedback is specificity. “If a tutor just ticks a box marked ‘Poor’, ‘Medium’ or ‘Good’, it’s not much use without an additional comment indicating why it came under that category.” In particular, the students studying Sciences felt it was helpful to get model answers with which they could compare their own work.

The students recognised that effective feedback also depends on their willingness to take comments on board and make an effort – otherwise it is a waste of a tutor’s time. Where a tutor suspects that a student has not spent enough time on an assignment, they suggested that an appropriate response would be: “This looks as if you should have spent more time on it, but if there are places where you were having serious difficulties, please come and see me about them.”

The message is clear: students want to improve their performance, and the more specific feedback they can have, the better. And they need it quickly: feedback that arrives months later is of little use.
Dear Forum . . .

“My students complain that university examinations are very different to those they have experienced in the past. Do you have any suggestions for how I might help them to prepare?”

Targeted practical hints

In my experience, it is worth pointing out to students that they need to achieve a balance in their preparation between mugging up on information and considering how it might be interpreted. They often need reminding that they should look critically at how data has been collected, particularly if they have not come from a Science background in terms of their A levels. It is not enough just to have the facts at their fingertips!

It is also worth emphasising that students should pay attention to the broader theoretical context when discussing data. Revision is often associated with memorising reams of information, and this can result in not seeing the wood for the trees. A reminder that they should attribute viewpoints to specific scholars is also useful: the pressure of examination time is not an excuse for broad-brush, vague statements.

In Archaeology, we cover such points in a dedicated session on examinations towards the end of the term in question. This includes an opportunity for questions and answers on the revision process and the examinations themselves.

Dr Harold Mytum, Department of Archaeology, ext 3929; email hcm1

Build on what they have experienced

The lecturer also needs to prepare! Check out a variety of recent AS and A level examination papers. Note the format and the syllabus variations between Boards. Pay special attention to how much guidance the examination questions give. In some A level subjects (Mathematics, for example) there has been a trend to increase the guidance given, and this may make students less able to get started on or navigate their way unprompted through a problem. As a result, you may want to adapt your syllabus, tutorial and examination questions. If you dislike the idea of giving extra guidance, try weaning them off their over-dependency gently. Of course, adding guidance does not have to mean the questions will become simpler, as each step can be made slightly more challenging.

Another trend in A level examinations is to demand less memory work. Instead, more supplementary data are provided. Open-book assessments, in which students are able to bring in textbooks or use their own notes, are commonplace at A level. If you consider that memorising particular information is essential then you should definitely warn your unsuspecting first year students. It may be worth reviewing, however, whether memory work is actually vital, or whether you could usefully adjust the emphasis of your questions towards assessing some of the higher levels of learning.

Tony Tew, Department of Electronics, ext 2358; email ait@ohm.york.ac.uk

Building preparation into the examination process

In Health Sciences, we try to reduce students’ perception of examinations as a threat as far as possible. Students are given the examination topics eight weeks in advance, and are then encouraged to attend a study day based on the topics, to clarify their thinking. The study day also gives them the opportunity to discuss their fears and concerns, and we spend some time going over what they might expect in terms of the examination day itself.

The examinations themselves are designed to guide the students’ preparation. We do not expect the students to rely heavily on memory. Instead, they are expected to research the given topics in some depth, and can take five reference sources for each topic into the examination with them, such as material from textbooks or up-to-date matter from nursing journals. These references are then attached to the student’s examination script.

Liz Jacques, Department of Health Sciences, tel 01423 553065; email eaj1

How can you help students focus their examination preparation?

You are invited to further the discussion: please write to the Forum editorial team or contact the correspondents individually. If you have an issue which you would like to raise in Forum and beyond, please contact Alice Wakely: ext 2018; email aw31
Introducing the Learning Technologist

Welcome to Dr Richard Walker, who joined the University in July as its first ever Learning Technologist. His role is to provide support for staff towards the development and use of online technologies in learning and teaching. We asked Richard about his approach to the development of online learning at York.

A centrally-supported Virtual Learning Environment

One of Richard’s main tasks is to assist efforts towards the establishment of a centrally-supported Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at York, which is targeted for September 2004. The first step in this direction has already been taken with the submission of a bid to HEFCE for Capital Round 3 funds to support the hardware and software costs. Richard is now developing a specifications list for the VLE in consultation with staff and students. A VLE Awareness Conference held on 26 November will be followed up by contacting departments about their specific needs, whilst students have been invited to submit their views using an online questionnaire.

Existing good practice

Over the summer, Richard has been busy visiting departments, looking at current online learning initiatives across the University. A digest of the good practice which he found is now available on the Forum website at www.york.ac.uk/~adisornn/Research/TTLHE.pdf. Developments in the Departments of Economics and Mathematics are of particular interest: further details are given in the case study below, and in Nigel Lowe’s report on his visit to Mathematics on page 4.

Richard would be happy to receive further enquiries about developing online learning at York: he can be contacted on ext 3850; email rw23.

Case study: distance learning online in Economics

The Department of Economics uses online learning to support internationally-based distance learning students on its postgraduate programmes in Health Economics for Healthcare Professionals. Students’ studies are based around module workbooks which comprise the basic module text, references to additional reading and exercises to be discussed online.

The virtual learning environment is based around the idea of a virtual campus. ‘Buildings’ include virtual seminar rooms, where students discuss exercises with their colleagues and a tutor, staff offices for private conversations between a student and their supervisor, notice boards, a café for students to socialise, pigeonholes for uploading assessed work, online quizzes and module surveys. Another ‘building’ provides connections to the Library and the Computing Service. ‘Seminar rooms’ are based around threaded discussion lists, providing information to users on who has said and read what – ideal for community building and small group learning.

For further information, see www-users.cs.york.ac.uk/~adisornn/Research/TTLHE.pdf

Dedicated funding for e-learning projects

Grants of up to £3,000 are available to encourage the development of e-learning across the University, for both campus-based and distance learning programmes. The emphasis should be on student-centred activities which engage the learner, such as simulations, self-directed study activities or online seminar discussions, rather than static information resources. Proposals which enhance provision for under-represented student groups are particularly welcome.

Further details and an application form are available at www.york.ac.uk/uni/vorg/learntech. Please contact Richard Walker (details above) for further guidance. Richard will also be available to provide continuing advice and guidance for successful projects.

Funding opportunities

Teaching enhancement projects

This year, £33,000 is available across the University to support innovative or developmental projects in learning and teaching. Grants, which are typically up to £5,000, might be used to purchase equipment and materials, to buy out staff time, to cover travel expenses or attend a conference. Further information, including an application form, is available at: www.york.ac.uk/admin/aso/TIDC/ FundWel.htm.

Funding for disseminating good practice

Grants of up to £750 are available for both departments and groups involved in learning and teaching, to fund activities to disseminate good practice in this area. You might wish to organise an ‘away day’ or workshop, or to buy out staff time to set up a poster display or webpage: any proposal to share good practice in learning and teaching will be considered. Collaborative bids are particularly welcome.

Last May, the Department of the History of Art used its grant towards an away day at Bedern Hall in York to look at its approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Proposals included an overhaul of the first year teaching programme to encourage students to become more research-active and independent. ”We were extremely surprised by how radical our final changes were, and by quite how much we achieved in a single day,” said Dr Jason Edwards. “We heartily encourage other departments to follow our lead.” A full report on the day, including details of the teaching ideas discussed, is available via the Forum website at www.york.ac.uk/~adisornn/Research/TTLHE.pdf.
Review: The Raymond Burton Library

The Raymond Burton Library for Humanities Research opened this summer, next door to the J B Morrell Library. Kate Giles paid a visit to find out what it can offer for those involved in learning and teaching Humanities at York.

Unlike many university libraries, the Raymond Burton Library is not designed primarily to support learning and teaching. With Special Collections on the ground floor, the first floor comprising a Reading Room stocked with bibliographic and review literature, a Microform Room housing the Eighteenth Century collection of texts on microfilm, a Projects Office accommodating short-term research project staff, and a Silent Study Room, this is a resource aimed at academic staff, their research assistants and PhD or MA postgraduate researchers. Why then, you may ask, should the Raymond Burton Library be featured in Forum?

Linking research and teaching

Christine Ellwood, Head of Subject Services and Information Systems, explains that the vision behind the new Library is one which breaks down the traditional dichotomy between research and teaching, promoting a mutually supportive relationship between the two, and encouraging students to “aspire to research”. One of the mechanisms through which the Library hopes to achieve this is the use of the two ground floor seminar rooms for teaching involving the Special Collections. These rooms enable staff both to integrate their own research and to introduce research resources into their teaching.

Students have the opportunity to use original texts rather than facsimiles, giving their studies an immediacy, and encouraging them to look at the materiality of the object as well as the words and images on the page. In addition, once students have become familiar with the Library’s resources in a learning environment, it is easier for them to gain confidence in using the Collections for their own dissertation or thesis research. The Departments of English, History, History of Art and Politics are already making use of these teaching opportunities.

Access

In encouraging the development of an open and integrated approach to research and teaching, Library staff have maintained that there should be no formal regulation of access to the Raymond Burton Library. They hope that the architecture of the building as well as the contents of its shelves will encourage an appropriate environment and discourage the casual user, from the minimal signage to the absence of information points and undergraduate guided tours. However, the Library is keeping its options open, and intends to monitor the use of the new facility closely over the course of the academic year.

Can research and teaching resources be separated?

Similarly, the Library is keen to maintain a flexible policy towards the collections housed within the Raymond Burton Library. Many departments have struggled with the idea that certain books can be designated as research rather than teaching resources. Indeed, it could be argued that the removal of such resources from the J B Morrell Library actively discourages students from aspiring to use these materials in their day-to-day studies. As a result, some departments such as History and English have chosen to split their bibliographic collections, whereas others such as History of Art have not. Subject Librarian Catherine Whiskin is quick to point out that the continuity of staff support between the two Libraries, coupled with the proximity of the buildings and the compatibility of the referencing systems, mean that collections strategies can be reviewed and changed by departments in the light of feedback from researchers and learners. Departments will need to make the most of this opportunity and work closely on research developments with their Subject Librarians in order to realise the full potential of the Raymond Burton Library.

For further information on the Raymond Burton Library, please contact Catherine Whiskin – ext 4491; email cw19, or your Subject Librarian.

Coming up in the next issue . . .

English and Related Literature • In depth: quantification skills
Focus on: postgraduates who teach • Computer Science