



Focus Groups Summary Report

A total of four focus groups were conducted within departments participating in the EN's research project. All the students who contributed to these focus groups completed the first survey in Spring 2013 and were a mix of 2nd and 3rd year (1st and 2nd at the time of the survey) and home, EU and international students.

The questions posed to students were decided at the most recent project meeting - for details see the EN website. They focused on gaining greater insight into the survey respondents' understanding of the questions, in particular around the issues of expectations and satisfaction.

1. What are students who don't attend lectures and don't have paid employment doing with their time? (QU. 8)

Lower attendance may be caused by:

- Lectures not being seen as worthwhile (in terms of quality of delivery and materials), i.e. lecturer reading from slides, not giving anything more than the textbook can provide, lack of application or clarity.
- The size of classes (harder to interact/ask questions in larger classes).
- Timing of lectures (early, late or spread out in the day, especially when students may be travelling home at weekends or if they live far away).
- Commitments with societies and sports clubs.
- Working for other deadlines, revising during exams or prioritising study for harder modules.
- The ability to watch lectures online.
- Childcare commitments (among mature students).
- Tiredness or laziness.

2. Please expand on the 'other social commitments' that students quoted as a reason for missing lectures. (QU. 17)

- Commitments to university societies and sports clubs.
- Careers work including attending fairs, completing applications and preparing for interviews.
- General social commitments with friends.

3. How did you interpret the term 'independent study'? (QU. 16)

- Some saw this as all work that they did outside the classroom, including preparing for a seminar, set homework, assignments etc.
- Others included study directly related to the course/examinable content (e.g. problem-sets, reviewing notes, recommended reading) but excluded extra reading.
- The majority only included group work if it related to a specific task rather than discussing the economy in general with friends.

- Other comments on this question included: some felt a lack of support or guidance regarding independent study requirements; plus structured classes and sufficient resources are needed to facilitate independent study.

4. When answering did you distinguish between expectations and satisfaction? (QU. 20-24)

- Some replied in terms of satisfaction, others thought back to their expectations. It was pointed out what some things can be quantified, e.g. exams, classroom hours, while others, like student support come down to satisfaction.
- Majority agreed that they were satisfied if their expectations were met. Some expectations were set by prospectus/course website (e.g. contact hours), others were based on personal expectations.
- Whether expectations were met varied from year to year (experience in 3rd year is what they would have liked throughout university and expectations were lowered by first two years). NOTE: these students had not reached 3rd year when they completed the survey.
- Some students said that the degree should be more challenging and that the bar should be set higher and that progression through the years should be gradual not the current jump to second year.
- With regards to maths, the majority thought there was too much maths and/or the maths included was too abstract and complex. A minority expected more maths. Others would have preferred the maths content to be introduced more gradually.
- Overall, where expectations weren't met this related to: content of course (relevance), delivery (quality of teaching), assessment





(just one final exam that doesn't test depth or breadth of understanding), feedback, skills development (concern for careers), the student body (lack of engagement, discussion), group work (less in quantity and poor engagement by others - this also raised issues of grades and language regarding weaker and international students respectively), student support and information provided.

- Highlighted that students may not like something or have expected it (e.g. quantity of maths) but may be satisfied as they realise the importance of it.

5. Comment on how you answered and interpreted the questions on the following: (QU. 19)

Part i: Difficulty/challenge of course

- Students want to be challenged by their courses.
- Some respondents found that their course didn't challenge them in the way they expected (until 3rd year, nb. after survey), i.e. less challenging; while others found it harder (again, especially in 2nd and 3rd year)
- Students identified a number of challenges away from the course content, including: knowing what lecturers want, lack of feedback inhibits improvement, conflicting information provided at times.
- Majority of students considered the difficulty of the course content, but some also mentioned the challenge of keeping up with the workload.

Part ii: Quantity of maths

- Divided opinion on whether there was more maths on courses than expected (across and within universities).
- A greater concern is the detail, difficulty, relevance and abstract nature of the maths that is taught.
- Those who studied A-level Economics felt that the degree would be similar (e.g. less maths and more essay writing).
- Concern that students lose the bigger picture at the expense of the maths and that a good practical understanding is more important than advanced, technical maths for careers.

Part iii: Development of practical skills

- Majority of students expected to develop more practical skills than they have through their degree.
- The main skills that respondents mentioned were: presentations, group work, problem-solving, IT and the ability to apply what they've learnt.
- A few participants emphasised that there are other opportunities at university (e.g. societies) to develop skills necessary for the work place.
- Concern over preparedness for working was the main concern for students with regards to skills development.
- Suggested that work placements facilitated by the department would be beneficial for this.

Part iv: Choice of module options

- Joint honours students felt more restricted in terms of module choices.
- Generally more choice as the degree progressed - but this

was preferred as felt that they could make more informed decisions.

- Some participants expected more choice, especially in 3rd year (nb. not in 3rd year at time of survey), but overall, the majority of participants were satisfied with the modules offered.
- Would prefer more cohesion between modules to improve overall knowledge.

Part v: Interaction with lecturers/tutors

- Majority of participants expected a lot more contact (classroom) hours and would like more small-group classes. Others had their expectations met.
- Frustration that other degrees (e.g. sciences) have more contact hours yet students pay the same fees.
- Disparity between lecturers/tutors with regards to how much help, support and time they offer.
- Participants also mentioned the quality of the contact - some were satisfied, while more felt the quality fell below their expectations, i.e. expected more discussion in tutorials rather than just going through problem sets on the board.

Part vi: Course relevance to the current economic situation

- Majority of participants expected more application/relevance to the current economic situation. (Thought that this only really came in 3rd year, after survey was completed). Some did feel their expectations were met. Overall, a concern about their ability to apply what they've learnt.
- Prefer to be presented with a number of approaches/opinions to facilitate discussion and drawing own conclusions.
- See the benefit of application for careers and to reinforce understanding.
- Application of maths was a concern for participants - seen as abstract.
- Some participants highlighted two aspects of 'relevancy', namely the course content and the "wider economic context", i.e. competition for jobs and importance of skills development.
- Expectations were less likely to be met in terms of preparation for work and skills development - this is a concern as many said that this is why they chose the degree, as a stepping stone to work.

6. Other comments

- Concern over participation of fellow students - lack of discussion, language concerns - expected more engagement and for the tutors to encourage this. Students were especially concerned about language and participation when it came to group work (assessed above all).
- Linked to this, some participants felt that universities were admitting 'poorer quality' students (grasp of English and grades) in order to make more money.
- Level of English of some of the lecturers/tutors was also seen as unsatisfactory.
- Some participants stated that the degree has lowered their expectations and they now just focus on getting a job rather than enjoying and engaging with the subject.