

OLC Meeting (3. September 2020) – Minutes/Recommendations

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Course Evaluations 2019/2020 (SEM 2)

Core Courses and Area Courses

Overall, evaluations for all core courses were positive. A number of issues stood out that should be taken into consideration for the future (especially if remote teaching continues):

Group work/group assignments: while the OLC generally agrees that some form of group work should be trained in *some* courses, the way this has been organized during the pandemic and shift to remote teaching might be too onerous and imbalanced. In courses where Pitch2Peer was used (e.g. IR), evaluations show that the workload was much too high (video-editing, scripting, group coordination) for the purpose of training the group work skills.

Individual assignments (papers): while it is desirable to have instructions/expectations for individual assignments set out clearly, it seems that in some courses this has led to an overload of requirements (e.g. elements that should be included in a paper) – this has come up in the evaluations for the course Politics. The setup of the country report could be reconsidered (does it have to be so onerous in terms of requirements – 2 case studies – given that students don't even have a proper training in case study methods?).

Teaching (tutorials/lectures): the vast majority of courses (lectures and working groups/tutorials) receive good evaluations. Courses that seemed to have problems in the past have improved (at least as far as one can tell based on the course evaluations). There is variation across courses in particular with regard to clarity/coherence, study-load/readings, didactic methods and difficulty level. For example, in the course FPE it seems that the connection between readings and lectures are not well integrated (student wonder why they need to read the readings if the content is not addressed in the lectures) or that the requirements for the tutorial assignments are unnecessarily onerous (presentations/conducting interviews). In general, and this seems to apply to several courses (e.g. to some Culture by Area courses), there is a disconnect between the contents of the lectures and the contents/assignments of the tutorials.

Recommendation:

Problems with group work (high and unbalanced work-load/free-riding) might be amplified in a remote-teaching setting. Especially group work that requires additional tech (videos etc.) might be too onerous and thus instructors could think/look into alternatives.

Whether instructors decide to use the work-groups/tutorials to address the lecture readings more in-depth, or rather concentrate on exercises that train academic skills (presentation, writing, argumentation etc.) or a combination of both...is up to them. One size will never fit all. However, whatever focus instructors choose for the work-groups/tutorials, it is important to communicate this clearly to the students.

Synchronous/Asynchronous teaching: given the last-minute shift from on-campus teaching to remote teaching, problems with regard to asynchronous and synchronous teaching arose. This comes back in several course evaluations across different courses. The underlying causes may differ per case, but usually they include technical issues with internet connection (for synchronous teaching), a lack of interaction between instructors/students (in remote teaching in general), slower response time from instructors via email, (re)scheduling issues and thus lack of contact hours. In particular in two courses, it seems that the lack of communication between instructors and students was a major issue. Whether in this particular case this was due to problems associated with asynchronous teaching is not entirely clear from the course evaluations.

Recommendation: It is important that students have at least some moment of contact with instructors and other students in work-groups (after all, part of their credits derive from those contact-hours – even if it is just a small part). And if remote teaching is shifted to a fully asynchronous format it is important that the communication channels between students and instructors are open (timely response to emails, and where possible online office hours).

Examination: There seems to be a fairly large imbalance in the exams of the area courses (History by Area). While the Europe Area exam was fairly extensive (6 open essay questions of 400 words each) other areas had to write significantly less/answer less questions.

Recommendation: The guidelines for take home exams/online examination could indicate a range (min/max) of questions/word-count.

Thematic Seminars (electives)

Keeping in mind that the response rates for the Thematic Seminars course evaluations were fairly low, the following two issues came up:

First, the corona crisis (and shift to remote teaching) also affected the course evaluations of the thematic seminars: students perceived that there were delays in communication about assignments, feedback etc. On the other side of the ledger, however, it is understandable that the crisis and shift to remote teaching implied also more work for instructors. (NB: During the first weeks of having shifted to remote teaching, the information sent out by the faculty explicitly acknowledged the higher workload that remote teaching entailed and that staff should try to do less (80/20 principle was invoked in several communications to staff)).

Second, deadlines: Some seminar leaders allowed for an extra week (extension) of the final paper deadline, while others didn't. In particular, some instructors extended deadlines for the final paper to an entire seminar group even though only few students made the initial request. While there should be some room for instructors to set deadlines (especially since the faculty's communication during the pandemic/lock-down signaled to instructors to be more lenient), obviously under "normal" circumstances extension of deadlines should be done on a case-by-case basis and not as a *tout court* decision for the whole group.

Languages

Language courses: not all language courses seem to have done the course evaluations, but from those courses where we received the evaluations, they seem to run well. One important (and recurring) issue in some language courses concerns the differences in the language proficiency level at which students start. Students who have prior knowledge of the language (usually bilingual students) start at a much more advanced level and thus the interaction in class between instructors and students is mainly driven by those students. Likewise, students in

Recommendation:

While the program effectively can't discourage students from taking a particular language course, the program could provide an additional (higher level) course for those students.

Foreign Language in Practice (FLiP)

A number of issues arose in the FLiP seminars.

First, it became evident across several FLiP seminars that there was a gap between expectation (what this seminar series tries to achieve) and reality (what instructors and students can do given the language proficiency level of the latter). FLiP instructors seemed to not to be aware of the (sometimes) fairly basic language proficiency levels of students (e.g. Korean). And while across different language courses language proficiency varies, it seems that, on the whole, the idea to use FLiP courses for working with foreign language sources that could be relevant for a student's thesis (e.g. newspaper articles) is too ambitious.

Second, in some seminars it wasn't clear to students how the course is supposed to fit into the program at that stage (e.g. Arabic). Again, this relates to the point raised above, namely that the official goal of having this course might be too ambitious. Moreover, the timing of the course might be inconvenient, i.e. doesn't give any "added value" for the thesis writing (students have picked their topics already and thus made already the decision wrt sources etc.).

Third, there was also a variation in language proficiency *within* specific FLiP seminars (some students had higher proficiency thanks to their exchange semester, or because they finished their previous language course on an advanced intermediate level). In German, Dutch and Spanish FLiP seminars students who obtained different levels of language proficiency (intermediate and advanced) were put together. The problem that arises then is to whose level will the instructor adjust the course, students with higher or lower language proficiency.

Recommendation:

Given the variation in proficiency levels across different language courses (ranging from A1 to B1) it seems unlikely that FLiP can deliver what it promises (working with primary sources in the foreign language that could be used for the thesis). This does not apply to all FLiP seminar, but still to a large part of them. Likewise, given that students rarely made use of the sources discussed in FLiP seminars in their thesis, and given that they expressed the desire to have more language practice it is worthwhile to reconsider the purpose and structure of this course. The OLC recommends to adjust the course description so as to decouple FLiP from the thesis writing process altogether. We suspect that some of the confusion about the "what" (language practice or working with sources?) and the "why" (obligatory for the thesis?) of this seminar

series stems from this ambition to have the language course tied to the thesis writing, and it raises expectations on the side of the students and instructors that cannot be fulfilled. Likewise, instructors should have greater freedom as to adjust their course structure to the actual level of the students: if newspaper articles are too difficult, but other primary sources work (e.g. a poster, poem) or other exercises that just focus on language practice work, then instructors should know that they can adjust the focus of the seminars. Relatedly, instructors of FLiP seminars should be informed about the proficiency levels students have after completing their language courses in the 2nd year.

Thesis Seminars

Overall the evaluations for the thesis seminars were positive. Some of the main points that came up:

One recurring issues throughout the past years was the mismatch between students' thesis topic and the theme of a specific thesis seminar. The survey results show that while mismatches still occur here and there, overall, responses indicated that there is a good match between students' thesis topics and the theme of the seminar.

In two seminars problems arose with regard to availability of supervisors/feedback – and one instructor has been already in contact with the program board and the olc about the evaluations.

The evaluations showed that the measures taken in light of the pandemic (e.g. restriction of access to library/buildings, effectively no access to hard copies of library sources during most parts of Spring 2020; limited possibilities to collect data through interviews for the thesis etc.) had a negative impact on the progress of the research and thesis writing.

Another issue that stood out concerned the group- and individual meetings: once the seminars switched to online/remote teaching halfway through the month of March, students didn't see much benefit in having group meetings on Kaltura. Instead they would have preferred more 1 on 1 meetings with the supervisor.

Likewise, it seems that students would prefer intermittent deadlines (e.g. for chapters of the thesis or for a draft).

Finally, it seems that the information about what the criteria are for a thesis (global perspective/multidisciplinary approach; structure of the thesis) are not clearly communicated to students at the beginning of the thesis seminar.

Recommendation: For the future – should a move to remote teaching become necessary again – it would be advisable to think about a) how students can access study material online (library); b) communicate clearly to students that for a thesis the baseline requirements do not include original data collection (i.e. students should be encouraged to use existing data-sets/sources). With regard to group meetings for remote teaching, it is advisable to think about replacing group meetings with individual meetings with students (however, this should not result in a higher workload – contact hours – for the instructor). Alternatively, the group sizes of thesis seminars could be reduced – this way also group meetings could be used for more individual feedback and discussion. Naturally, this would entail more thesis supervisors need to be made available. However, the OLC is convinced that this would be to the benefit of both students and supervisors: supervisors would have more time to give in-depth feedback and guidance, and students would be able to have more moments in which they can discuss their research/writing progress. With smaller groups it would be more feasible to also have intermittent deadlines (e.g. for a first draft

of the thesis). With regard to communicating the criteria (what is expected of students, how a thesis should look like/structure etc.) it would be advisable to double check if this is indeed the case as some students indicated in the evaluations. Perhaps it would also clear things up if an example of a literature review and a final thesis could be made available to students (provided the author of the thesis agrees).

Online Teaching (Recommendation):

If online teaching continues into the 2nd semester – and if the measures in the region allow and provided language instructors are available – language courses should get priority for on-campus teaching.