Student Focus Group Report

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Enhancing the learning experience of students in Philosophy, Theology, Religious Studies, Philosophy of Science, and History of Science, Technology and Medicine (PRS) is at the core of the Subject Centre's (SC) mission. In order to help us fulfil this mission, we organise student focus groups each year. The groups generate feedback on the student learning experience in PRS which we use to guide our work with academics and students.

In 2008, we invited all level two and three single- and jointhonours students in PRS departments in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to apply to take part in the focus groups. 41 students applied. Of these, we invited 12 to join us. The groups took place over two days (27-28 November 2008). Nine students attended. The student group was constituted as follows:

- Gender: five males and four females;
- Level of study: undergraduate levels two and three;

- Type of study: single and joint honours;
- Subject(s) of study: Philosophy; Theology and Religious Studies; Philosophy, Religion and Ethics; Theology for Education; Philosophy and Politics; History and Religious Studies;
- Institutions: students represented a broad range of institutions from older universities to newer HE colleges.

The group also included part-time and mature students. Over the course of two days, students participated in several interactive workshop- and discussion-style sessions, designed to generate feedback on their:

- Motivations for studying PRS subjects;
- Expectations of PRS degrees prior to coming to university;
- Approaches to learning, especially reading and writing for their degrees;
- Views on module design;
- Views on assessment;
- Best and worst learning experiences;
- Career aspirations.

The sessions allowed the students to reflect on how they are learning; to gain a deeper understanding of the pedagogies of their disciplines; and to express their views on learning and teaching in a neutral and supportive environment. They also enabled the students to make comparisons between their experiences and those of students from other institutions studying their own or cognate subjects, and to draw insights from these. Feedback from the groups, collected via evaluation forms, was excellent, with students saying that they had valued the opportunity to discuss their views on learning and teaching.

The report which follows is a thematic analysis of the feedback generated at the focus groups.

Issues Affecting Students Before and During the Transition to Higher Education

Progression

Progression from secondary to higher education (HE) was discussed at several points during the focus groups. Most of the students said that their degree choices had been influenced by their enjoyment of PRS and related subjects at school. Most had studied PRS and cognate Arts and Humanities subjects, including Sociology, History and English, at secondary level.

We wanted to find out about students' expectations of a degree in PRS before they arrived at university, to see if they matched with their subsequent experiences. We ran an activity designed to identify the topics which students in PRS expect to study before coming to university, the topics they want to study, and the topics they actually study, in order to facilitate a comparison between their expectations and desires, and the reality. The data generated could be helpful in making an informed judgement about whether any of the students primarily studying Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) would have chosen to do Philosophy at university, and whether any of the students primarily studying Philosophy would have chosen to do TRS, if the content of the degree had been different (but such that it remained definable as a Philosophy/TRS degree), or if the degree had been marketed differently, without its content being changed. The results also indicate discrepancies between what TRS students think Philosophy degrees consist of in terms of subject content, and the reality; and between what Philosophy students think TRS degrees consist of and, again, the reality.

Three out of four TRS students would have been even more likely to have applied to study TRS at university if they thought that 'Religion and liberalism' was going to be covered in the curriculum, but three out of four would have also been surprised to learn, prior to coming to university, that this topic was going to be covered. All of the TRS students said it had been possible to study it at some level during their degrees. Three out of four TRS students said they would have been even more likely to have applied to study TRS at university if they knew that 'Creation, evolution and religion' was going to be covered in the curriculum, but three out of four would have also been surprised to learn, prior to coming to university, that this topic was going to be covered. In reality, most of the TRS students had had the opportunity to study this topic.

All four TRS students would have been even more likely to have applied to study TRS if they knew that 'Religion and politics' was going to be covered in the curriculum. Two out of four students had expected it to be covered, and one did not have any expectations either way (one student did not respond to this part of the question). Three of the students reported that it had been possible to study this subject at some level during their degree. These observations, particularly with regards to 'Creation, evolution and religion', correlate with the results of a different session in which the students were asked to design their own modules. In this session, the TRS group1 proposed a module on 'Science and Religion', designed to address the 'history of [the] relationship between science and religion; critical examination of theories in [the] module area; analysis of contemporary relationship, including structure and nature of universe; examination of the conflict and resolutions between science and religion'. The theories to be studied were: 'Darwinism, evolution, big bang theory, creationism, plate techtonics [sic]'.

All four TRS students said that a Philosophy degree would have been more attractive if they knew that 'The meaning of life' was going to be covered in the curriculum; two of the four expected this topic to be part of a Philosophy degree. However, the Philosophy questionnaire for Philosophy students revealed that three of the four students had only had the opportunity to study this topic to a small extent, or not at all.

Four out of five Philosophy students would have been even more likely to apply to do a Philosophy degree if they knew that 'Aesthetics' was going to be covered in the curriculum. Four reported that it had been possible to study this topic at some level during their degree, but only one had expected to be able to study it (with three having no expectations either way). Three of the four students who answered this question would have been even more likely to apply to do a Philosophy degree if they knew that the 'The meaning of life' was going to be covered in the curriculum, but all three also said that this topic could only be studied to a small extent, or not at all, in their degrees. However, two of the three students who answered this part of the question had expected to be able to study it, saying that they would have been 'very surprised' if it had not been included in a Philosophy degree.

Three out of five students reported that 'Sexual ethics' had not been available to study in their degrees; but four out of the five students had no interest in studying this topic in any case. In different session, Philosophy students made a related point that their degrees had had more of a theoretical and historical focus, and less of an applied one, than they had expected. In the session where students were asked to design their own modules, it is notable that the Philosophy group designed a module on 'Contemporary Applied Ethics', which covered 'environmental holism; business ethics; medical dilemmas/bioethics; animal/primate testing & treatment; war'.

Four out of five Philosophy students said that a TRS degree would have been more attractive if they knew that 'Creation, evolution and religion' and 'Religion and politics' were going to be covered in the curriculum. In both cases, three out of the five either did not expect these topics to be a part of a TRS degree or had no expectations either way. Four out of five Philosophy students said that a TRS degree would have been more attractive if they knew that 'Philosophy of religion' was going to be covered in the curriculum (three said it would have been 'much more'; attractive, and one 'a little more' attractive); but equally, three would have been very surprised if this had not been covered in a TRS degree.

To summarise these findings:

- Both Philosophy and TRS students are interested in studying 'The meaning of life'. The majority of Philosophy students, and half of the TRS students, expected this topic to be covered in a Philosophy degree. However, the majority experience among the Philosophy group was that this topic had only been available for study to a small extent, or not at all. If the study was repeated on a larger scale, and if, this time, TRS students were asked about whether this topic was covered in their degrees, and if the topic was found to be covered in a significant number of TRS degrees but not in as many Philosophy degrees, then this would suggest that students interested in this topic may have at least one reason to opt for a TRS degree over a Philosophy one.
- Philosophy students are attracted to Philosophy degrees that include 'Aesthetics', but most do not expect this topic to be covered in a Philosophy degree. In reality, however, most Philosophy students are able to study it to some extent.
- TRS students are attracted to TRS degrees that include 'Creation, evolution and religion', but most do not expect this topic to be covered in a TRS degree. In reality, most TRS students have an opportunity to study this topic.
- TRS students are attracted to TRS degrees that include 'Religion and liberalism', but most do not expect this topic to be covered in a TRS degree. In reality, however, most TRS students are able to study it to some extent.

Barriers to problem-free progression

The Philosophy students reported experiencing some difficulties adjusting to independent learning in higher education. Whilst they emphasised that they did not expect to be spoon-fed by tutors, they felt that more contact time with tutors would have smoothed their transition. What was interesting was their attempt to express this view whilst simultaneously dissociating themselves from it, as if they were speaking on behalf of other students not present at the focus group: 'There is a lot more independent learning than in school, which it seems some people struggle to cope with'. The possibility emerges that some students are embarrassed to seek help from tutors because they worry that this will make them appear dependent.

A couple of the students felt that their progression to undergraduate study would have been easier had they not been taught by postgraduate teaching assistants, and they were surprised that this was common practice. A comment was made that 'post-grad teachers lack confidence and breadth of knowledge'.

Despite these barriers, all the students agreed that they would opt for the same degree subjects if given the choice again.

Issues Affecting Students During Higher Education

Ambivalence about module choice

The students were divided over the question of whether it is helpful to have an extensive choice of modules. With one exception, the Philosophy students reported having had a wide range of module choice at their institutions; some of the TRS students reported likewise, but several in the TRS group had had only a limited selection. Some of the Philosophy students' best learning experiences had included being able to choose from a wide range of modules, but others in the Philosophy group had felt overwhelmed by the choice, and this had contributed to their worst learning experiences. One student complained that he had had to choose three modules from a list of 30. The students said that the extensive choice of modules was particularly problematic at level one because they did not have the background knowledge to understand what the module titles and descriptions meant. One commented:

> I think that was a problem, because I didn't know enough about it, so I chose modules in the first year just based on what would be easiest rather than what would actually help me later on

in the course?even though there were course descriptions, reading it didn't actually help, I co uld read 'you will have a deep understanding of the philosophy of religion', but it didn't mean anything to me at the time?I think if I knew then, before I started, what it would be like, then I pr obably would have not done it?I was going to leave after the first year.

Another student agreed that module descriptions in departmental handbooks were not particularly useful in helping students to choose their modules. One of the students suggested that a remedy to this would be to set up a system whereby, during the first two weeks of the semester, students should be allowed to attend as many different classes as they liked without formally registering for any, in order to get a flavour of what was on offer. Only at the end of this period should they be required to register for modules.

The impact of teaching delivery on the student learning experience

When the students were asked about their best learning experiences, their discussions centred on the importance of good tutors. They related stories of inspirational, enthusiastic tutors, and agreed that a sense of humour was a key characteristic of a good tutor. They felt that younger teachers who are less advanced in their careers may have more enthusiasm and be more open to new ideas (which they regarded as a positive thing), but they did not acknowledge any conflict between this and their scepticism about the academic capabilities of postgraduate teaching assistants.

The students also discussed the value of (well-facilitated) small group discussions. One of the Philosophy students said: 'The discussion sessions that we have, in philosophy, I think it's very useful, people arguing their case?seminar gr oups of around 10 people, we get to listen to the views of others?'. The TRS students also said that they value fr eedom of expression in classes, and that they enjoy contributing to discussions and having their own views challenged, whilst challenging those of their peers and their tutors.

Both Philosophy and TRS students spent some time discussing how emotive, sensitive, and potentially controversial topics should be approached in small group discussions. They agreed that as long as all members of the group showed respect for each other's views, no topic should be excluded. They also felt that if 'difficult' topics were included in the course description, then students could not have legitimate objections to them being discussed in class. It was surprising, therefore, to learn that one of the institutions represented by the students allowed Muslim students to be excused from seminars discussing homosexuality in a course addressing religion in society.

There was a consensus among the students that small group discussions need to be chaired well in order to be effective means of deepening student engagement with learning. The students expressed frustration with facilitators who allow people to deviate from the main point of the session.

The students' discussions of their worst learning experiences centred on teaching delivery. Complex and rushed lectures; dull presentations and 'boring delivery', including the reading aloud of PowerPoint slides in lectures; monotonous and unfocused teaching; tutors who distribute unstructured lecture notes to the class; tutors who fail to provide handouts altogether; and tutors who are unable to control or engage with the class, were all listed as contributing to the students' worst learning experiences; note that the detrimental effects of poor classroom management on learning was emerging as a theme in the students' discussions. One student said the following of one of their tutors:

He's an amazingly knowledgeable man, but his delivery, it's really hard to follow his lectures, he stutters and goes off on his own thoughts, and his lecture notes are really unstructured as well, just like a block, not even bullet points, almost like his own shorthand and [it is] really difficult to use them either to follow the lecture or to look at afterwards.

Students also said that it had been obvious when they were being taught by tutors who had been forced to teach subjects in which they had no interest, and that this had also contributed to their worst learning experiences. Finally, TRS students expressed scepticism about what they termed 'creative, unacademic' teaching methods, giving the showing of 'biased, inaccurate documentaries' as an example.

Students' limited exposure to e-learning

When students were asked, in their discipline groups, to design a module, both the Philosophy and the TRS groups suggested multiple media content for the seminar and lecture materials?'film, music, literature, art ?' were reco mmended by one group?but neither group recommended any form of technologically-enhanced learning. Their notes al so revealed that their experience of e-learning had been thin and unfruitful.

However, discussions did reveal some examples of the students supplementing their teaching with online resources. One student claimed: 'there's a lot of philosophy on youtube, some of it's crap, but the BBC's made quite a lot of philosophy programmes, Brian McGhee did lots of interviews...Peter Singer'. 'Philosophy Bites'[2] was also recommended by one of the students, who said:

> If you ever read something and you can't understand it, go to 'Philosophy Bites' have a look there, and then when you hear somebody talking about it, it's so much easier than reading all that dense prose, and that's a great way to untangle?

Notwithstanding these examples, it was not evident that the students had experienced sustained and substantive engagement with e-learning. This is somewhat surprising, given the range of different institutions they represented.

Students' understandings of the processes of learning and teaching

We devoted a session to exploring the extent to which the students understood the nature of the processes that are embedded in programmes of study, the application of assessment criteria to course outcomes, and the overall shape of the education they are receiving in higher education.

The students were asked to design a module on a topic of interest to their subject-specific groups, paying special attention to the processes that underpin the module and how students studying it are expected to learn. This is based on a technique used by the session facilitator to encourage new staff to focus on the philosophical content of educational processes. Many of the students appreciated the insight into how modules are designed and structured.

In terms of outcomes both groups stressed the development of analytical and evaluative skills. Interestingly the Philosophy group stressed the need to be able to apply the learning from the course and to develop the ability to 'identify issues and ethical dilemmas in the world today' while the TRS group's module focused on skills used in an 'academic setting'.

It could be concluded that while the students sought 'relevant' and engaged material in courses they preferred those materials that were concrete over the abstract, and that they were not exploratory in the delivery and assessment of modules. This suggests that their own experiences of teaching that has moved beyond the lecture and seminar format is very limited, so that it is regarded as 'out of the ordinary' when encountered. From this one could infer that tutors themselves are unclear on the pedagogical advantages that can be gained from other teaching techniques. And while it is tempting to think that simply making examples and content 'concrete' will address recruitment and retention issues, this would be to do the students a disservice since they themselves recognise the importance of abstract analytical skills as the outcomes of learning.

Both groups did, however, set out intended outcomes, means of delivery and assessment criteria for their courses,

although these tended to be of a traditional form 'lecture and seminars ? optional one-to-one tutor support ? reading list s' with '50% split between exams and end of module assessment; with presentations in seminars' for example. Discussion revealed that in some cases their experiences had been more diverse than the resulting design, suggesting that more innovative forms of delivery and assessment are seen as divergent from an accepted core model.

The students' scepticism of non-traditional learning and teaching methods was emphatically expressed during their discussions of group work (in a different session). The students had had very unsatisfactory experiences of group working and generally found group work, especially group presentations, problematic. One said:

> In presentations, you're too reliant on the other members of the group, so if people don't pull their weight, in a group presentation? you can slave away.

Suggestions from the facilitator that this situation reflects that which they will face as employees, and therefore that group work helps prepare them for life after graduation, drew mixed responses.

Students' active approach to reading academic texts

When questioned about their approaches to reading texts, both the Philosophy and TRS students appreciated that texts opened other conceptual doors and that reading could be a core activity in the development of analytical and critical skills. The Philosophy students noted that one of the purposes of academic reading is to 'stimulate [your] own critical thought?critical thought is useful at [an] academic level to establish [the] process of arguments'. The TRS st udents related this to other factors in learning, saying that reading 'enable[d] continual motivation...throughout reading, [you should] ask questions of the text so you are able to challenge ideas and arguments'.

The development of an active engagement with texts and the acquisition of critical skills were addressed directly by all the students. This suggests that some aspects of active learning are embedded, at least in theory, in academic practice for Philosophy and TRS. This is supported by analysis of individuals' notes from this session. There was little indication that students regarded texts simply as authoritative repositories of knowledge when encountered in their learning. On the other hand, neither discipline group raised questions about the reliability of texts, either electronic or in hard copy, and neither discussed how judgements about the quality of texts should be made. This suggests that critical and analytic skills are being encouraged but that there is space to look again at this critical judgement aspect of the learning experience. A social constructivist reading of pedagogy may downplay this kind of concern as tending to encourage 'elitism', but without a sense of quality in reading students will be unable to successfully navigate through ongoing debates in contemporary research and reach higher levels of engagement within the humanities.

Students' engagement with their own learning processes

When students were asked to take part in activities designed to tease out their understandings of the link between their disciplines and education, the differences between the two disciplines, Philosophy and TRS, were more marked than in other sessions. The Philosophy group focused on the role that philosophy can play in conceptually unpacking education, voicing a series of questions: 'What is the purpose of education? Empowering? Controlling? Both? Neither? ? What are we learning? Different types of knowledge? What is knowledge? ? Who teaches? Who learns? Who benefits? ? What ought to be taught?' The notes from the session support the view that it was not difficult for the Ph ilosophy group to associate education with their subject in terms of the epistemological, ethical and political issues it raises. They also asked about the methods of teaching, suggesting a 'holistic' approach as the best strategy. The question of whether any forms of assessment could ever be appropriate in 'quantifying "learning"' was a radical point reached at the end of their reflections. However, there was no attempt to read back from educational practice into the nature of philosophy. This indicated that the next step in developing good judgement and insight about the nature of learning itself had not been reached by the group; and that there is room for further development in this area in

making the curriculum transparent in its pedagogic operation.

The TRS group presented wider person- and society-oriented issues that connected their educational experience to their subject. They specifically raised the prospect that 'theology as a degree influences its cultural environment' in a multi-faith society, and that study of religion could lead to 'an increased understanding of other cultures/faiths?develops and fosters tolerance'. It should be noted that no-one suggested the opposite (possible) effect where knowledge leads to greater intolerance through the highlighting of unacceptable beliefs and practices. The TRS group also stated that 'one's own spirituality' increases in contact with other faiths through the study of religion, but they noted that TRS could be used to 'back up atheism' as part of a critical evaluation of religion. The connections to education per se seemed harder to make for the TRS group. However, it could be suggested that they only lacked the same application of their own learning experience back to their discipline that the Philosophy students missed. On the whole the students accepted in principle the need for critical engagement with their own learning processes and activity. They saw the need to move beyond passive acceptance of ideas and texts and to challenge their milieu if they are to advance in understanding and skills. However, in drilling down to their chosen disciplines, there were obvious critical gaps in the connections to be made from the specific encounter with the subject to their learning experience. It was not through lack of appreciation of conceptually nuanced questions about the place of the subjects in relation to education, but, it could be suggested, through a failure of curricula to make explicit what is gained by the courses undertaken and, crucially, how this is a product of both the discipline, the nature of education and the wider context of both in the education system of higher education in the UK.

Concerns about workload

Students reported that unbalanced and excessive workloads had contributed to their worst learning experiences. They tended to have one heavy semester and one light semester each year, but would prefer work to be spread more evenly. The students were also concerned about their tutors'?as they saw it, unreasonable?expectations of what they could achieve within particular timeframes, and a number felt stressed as a result of their studies. One of the Philosophy students said:

> it does feel like we're cramming a massive amount of content into a relatively short time?So much reading, and I haven't got the time or the brain space to deal with it all.

Diversity in assessment methods

Students were given an opportunity during the focus groups to reflect on their experiences of assessment. They welcomed the opportunity to do so, and to hear about assessment methods used in other institutions. The results of the assessment session provide further evidence that students are traditional in their learning, teaching and assessment preferences. Their opinions are, however, noticeably less traditional when they are asked to express them individually rather than in groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common methods of assessment the students had experienced were essays and examinations, but at least some of them had experienced assessment by presentation (individual and group); on the basis of attendance and participation in classes; via other forms of written coursework (dissertations, reading or text summaries) or exams (logic tests); and, in one case, by means of dramatic performance.

The group also discussed which of these assessment methods were summative (counted towards their final degree classification). In this context students found a much greater reliance on traditional methods of assessment, namely essays and exams; and, in the majority of cases, 50-100% of summative assessment was conducted via examination, with the remainder being undertaken via coursework essays. A notable exception was presented by one joint honours student, whose degree programme was assessed entirely via coursework, comprising 95% essays and 5% dramatic performance.

It was interesting to note that, whilst several students expressed individual preferences for more diverse and innovative assessment methods?for example, favouring less emphasis on exams in favour of more oral assessment su ch as presentations and performances, and/or a greater variety of written coursework assignments?when asked to ne gotiate their 'ideal' assessment schemes in discipline groups, what they produced was, by their own admission, more traditional:

- Philosophy students voted for 50% examination and 50% coursework essays, with the caveat that this should be complemented by increased opportunities to practise writing skills and gain feedback (i.e. additional coursework essays for formative assessment only).
- TRS students opted for 45% examination, 45% coursework essays (two), and 10% individual presentation. (Group presentation assignments were widely unpopular, due to perceived risks that not all group members contribute equally.)3

It could be useful to explore further whether the move witnessed here, towards a more conservative approach when negotiating a group decision on assessment methods, is an inevitable or desirable outcome. Given the students' individual preferences for innovative assessment, it may be that they perceive it to be easier to do well in traditional forms of assessment than in more innovative forms, and thus regard the former as the 'safe option', although the latter may in the end provide them with skills which better prepare them for life outside academia. There is a wider question at the root of this, that of what the students think a degree, and education in general, is for.

Diversity in feedback

The group briefly discussed their experiences of receiving feedback on their work. These varied from 'just a grade' with no qualitative feedback on an assignment, to up to two pages of written comments or one-to-one feedback sessions with their tutor. Some students had the opportunity to obtain formative feedback on essay drafts. Students expressed dissatisfaction with the level of guidance available regarding assessment criteria?not all students had re ceived information about the criteria against which their work was assessed; and in some cases, it was felt that the criteria available were not sufficiently discipline-specific to be of genuine use. There was also a degree of scepticism about marking practice, insofar as students felt that many staff did not make use of the full spectrum of marks available.

Issues Affecting Students After Higher Education

The relationship between degree choice and employment prospects

Students appreciated the opportunity to think about what they would do after their degree. In many cases, they did not have a specific career path in mind, although some were working towards particular goals (teaching; further studies); and it should also be noted that some were clear about directions they did not want to take; for example, one of the TRS students declared that s/he would not seek to work in 'something holy'. After some discussion, other possible career paths suggested by students included law; the armed forces; the national health service (perhaps working in policy); and self-employment?setting up your own business.4

When asked how their choice of degree subject related to their career ambitions, members of both the TRS and Philosophy groups identified a tension. They said that part of the reason they had chosen their degree subjects had been simply that they enjoyed studying them, but that they were aware that their choices would not lead them to a particular job. The Philosophy group identified the following reasons for their choice of degree: love of ideas and intellectual challenges, also referred to as 'a romantic attraction to intellectual pursuits'; a desire to avoid over-prescriptive degree courses; a desire to do a degree which gives them the freedom not to have to give the 'right answer'; and a desire to improve their analytical and problem-solving skills. Both the Philosophy and the TRS

students felt that their prioritisation of interest in their subject over pragmatic considerations had impelled them towards non-vocational degrees. Some commented that there is 'not much you can do with these degrees' (TRS group) and that 'few of us are going to end up as professional philosophers, are we?' (Philosophy group)

Not all of the students regarded non-vocational degrees as problematic, however. Most of the Philosophy students had no clear idea what sort of work they wanted to do after university, but they said that one of the reasons they had chosen a degree in Philosophy, beyond having an interest in the subject, was because it would help them to develop a range of transferable skills, which would give them the freedom to choose from a range of careers: 'The great thing about philosophy? it's like any arts subject, you can do anything with it...'. A minority of the students had not ex perienced any such tensions between degree choice and employment prospects. A couple from the TRS group said that they had specifically chosen to do TRS with a view becoming qualified to do a particular job, including teaching.

Difficulty in articulating subject-specific skills When asked to think about the skills they were acquiring as a result of their degree studies, the students compiled the following list:

- Clarity of thought
- Logical approach
- Problem solving
- 'Thinking outside the box'
- Critical thinking
- Articulate arguing
- Written and verbal communication skills
- Coherent public speaking
- Persuasive speech
- Negotiating
- Tolerance?degree specific: understanding of cultural diversity
- Team work skills
- Research skills
- Organisational skills
- Planning skills
- Ability to work to deadlines
- Ability to work objectively
- Persistence in achieving goals

The students took part in mock interviews designed to tease out their understanding of the skills they are acquiring. They gave the following responses:

What benefits do you feel your degree has left you with? What skills have you gained from it?

> (Phil student): in the course of the research as a student I developed clear thinking, critical thinking skills, problem solving, being applied to a target, training in logical thinking?I think that my work experience and my degree has trained me to pick out relevant information, assess a problem or a question and pick out the information that's actually relevant to that, and working with people, developing respect and tolerance for other people, with working, that would help in

this job.

What sort of skills do you think you've brought, uniquely, from your degree, that you could use in a job?

> [TRS student] ? the ability to be able to read through information at vast speeds and actually co mprehend the information, because we get an awful lot of information when we're studying for religious studies, we're able to actually comprehend what we're actually reading, and that's one enormously effective skill to bring to the work.Apart from that, generally, the ability to get along with other people and work professionally and to deadlines.

? is there anything that you think is distinctive about what you've learned from studying theology and re ligious studies that graduates from other disciplines wouldn't bring to the job, that you could offer that would be unique?

> [TRS student] Because we do tend to talk to a lot of different people of various religions and cultures, that actually does help us to become tolerant to everyone (words inaudible) and I think that those that unfortunately are not studying those kinds of subjects, such as those Jewish, Islamic, unfortunately they don't bring those things because they're not used to being together with other people from other faiths.

Evidently, the students tended to focus on generic transferable skills, finding it more difficult to identify and articulate relevant capabilities and experience that were specific to their subject of study. They were very enthusiastic about the Subject Centre's student employability guides: Where Next? Unlocking the Potential of your [Philosophy / Theology and Religious Studies] Degree,5 which were distributed after the interviews. The students felt that these were a valuable resource which would assist them in articulating the distinctive benefits of their disciplinary studies. They were very keen to have help with their career planning, with most seeming to have done very little work on this prior to our session.

Concluding Reflections

To conclude this report, it will be useful to focus on one key point which emerges from these findings: that PRS undergraduates are, in many ways, more traditional in their educational outlook than we might think. In their attitudes to module choice (both in terms of range of choice and the content of modules on offer), and to teaching and assessment methods, they show a marked preference for the tried and tested over the innovative.

It is sometimes assumed that students clamour to study 'hot topics'?provocative and controversial subjects which are gu aranteed to polarise opinion and ignite lively debates in the classroom?when they come to university to do PRS de grees. Our findings urge caution when approaching such a conclusion; that studying sexual ethics, for instance, is of little interest to our students may provide food for thought for those in the business of curriculum design.

It is also simplistic to assume that giving students a wide range of modules from which to choose empowers them. Students can feel overwhelmed by the extensive choice of modules on offer; sometimes, too much choice can be a bad thing. The effect of presenting students who have come straight from school, and who have no real experience of independent learning, with a baffling number of modules to choose from, is likely to have a negative effect on progression and retention. In terms of teaching, students are sceptical about creative methods and are particularly wary of group work. Those we interviewed had had relatively limited engagement with e-learning, given advances in this field in PRS. Students feel more comfortable with lectures and seminars. Their traditionalism is even more manifest when it comes to assessment, with students preferring essays and exams to more experimental forms

(although this tendency was less marked when the students we spoke to were questioned individually rather than in groups).

There are many reasons why students are suspicious of innovative forms of learning, teaching and assessment. It may simply be that they have had little experience of them. But it may be that where they have experienced innovation, their experience has led them to question its value and to crave the security of more traditional pedagogical approaches. In this case, it is possible that the innovation in question was inappropriate for the context in which it was applied, or that it was set up and/or facilitated poorly. It is also conceivable that sceptical attitudes towards divergence from the conventional model of lectures and seminars, essays and exams, on the part of tutors could filter through to students, who are greatly influenced by their tutors' dispositions regarding such things.

The intensification of students' traditionalism when assessment is the topic of discussion suggests that students are preoccupied with doing whatever they need to do in order to pass. They seem to feel that experimental and exploratory learning and assessment are luxuries they cannot afford, risks they do not want to take; they are perceived as something 'wacky' which will distract them from their path to academic success. Traditional forms of assessment are a 'safe' option because they are thought to be easier to do well in. Students do not seem to have considered the possibility that there is a relationship between their preference for traditional methods of learning and assessment and their inability to articulate the subject-specific skills they are acquiring as PRS students.

The picture which emerged from the focus groups was that of an enthusiastic cohort of students, who are keen to succeed academically and professionally, but who are not at all confident that creative forms of learning and assessment can help them towards these goals. These students are under pressure to conform to a particular definition of academic success, and this limits the extent to which they are willing to engage with newer pedagogies.

It is little surprise, then, that these students look for stability and hope to find it in adequate module descriptions, well-structured modules with clear goals, and in well-managed classrooms. The detrimental effects of poor classroom management on their learning was a recurring theme in the focus group discussions. Students also lack confidence when it comes to career planning, and they are very keen to have help with this. The students we interviewed seemed to have had very little guidance from tutors in this regard. However, they admitted that they are reluctant to ask their tutors for assistance?with career planning and with study in general?for fear that they may be perceived to be stru ggling to get to grips with independent learning. Better student-tutor communication could go some way towards resolving this problem. If tutors make it known that they are available to assist students and that they are sensitive to problems related to progression and transition, students are more likely to feel comfortable asking for help.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to emerge from these groups is that it is time for a period of sustained, critical reflection on what creativity and innovation means in our disciplines. What does creativity/ innovation look like in the classroom? Why are creative/innovative approaches to learning and teaching worthwhile? How does creativity/ innovation help students learn? What are the challenges of creative/innovative learning and teaching, and how can we confront them? How does creativity/innovation enhance student employability? And, perhaps most crucially, how can we ensure that creative/innovative methods of learning are assessed appropriately, with fairness and with rigour? It strikes us that encouraging such a discussion may go some way to addressing the suspicions of both students and staff in our disciplines that 'creative' is a euphemism for 'wacky'.

1 For most exercises, the students were divided into subject groups (broadly, Philosophy and TRS), in order to facilitate the straightforward extraction of subjectspecific feedback when it came to analysing the data.

2 'Philosophy Bites' (**http://www.nigelwarburton.typepad.com/philosophy_bites/**) bills itself as follows: 'podcasts of top philosophers interviewed on bite-sized topics'.

3 There is a growing literature on assessing student group-work effectively and fairly?see for example: ht tp://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/assessment/Group.

4 For more information on self-employability in TRS see the report from a project conducted by Jan Sumner for the Subject Centre: **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsdocuments/421**

5**http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp_guides.html**.

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