# Synchronous student co-design of a second-year core module in history

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## Summary

This project entails a group of second-year history students simultaneously completing and co-designing a module that has the potential to become a core part of the history curriculum. The module, titled 'The Historian's Toolkit for Life', is a research-skills and activity-based course that is ultimately designed to develop the skills necessary both for completion of a dissertation in third-year and also in post-graduate contexts (such as employment or further study). Students complete the module, but also simultaneously co-design and evaluate different aspects of the course. The final assessment is to reflect on their experiences on the module and make recommendations to the wider department as to whether they believe the module should be implemented as a core part of the history programme going forwards.

## Please briefly describe the activity undertaken for the case study

Currently, there is no core module at Level 5 (second year) for history students, which has the potential to leave students underprepared for the challenges of the dissertation completed at Level 6. The purpose of this project is therefore to explore the potential for the introduction of a compulsory course at Level 5 (second year) that targets, and helps to develop, history students' research skills, as well as their wider employability and life skills in preparation for both their dissertations and also the wider world after graduation. The module is titled 'The Historian's Toolkit for Life'.

However, rather than simply write and introduce the module onto the programme, the opportunity was taken to implement a more student-driven approach to module design. This was to ensure that it was as effective, helpful and useful to as many students as possible. It was therefore offered out as an option for the current academic year, and a pilot group of students completed the course while, at the same time, reflecting on their experiences throughout. This was designed to help identify the most effective assessment strategies, most appropriate marking criteria (and design the rubrics), consider some of the challenges involved in scaling-up the module so that a significantly larger number of students could undertake it. Ultimately, make a recommendation as to whether they feel the module should be implemented into the programme or not.

## How was the activity implemented?

The initial outline of the module was firstly put together by the module convenor, and it was then offered out as an optional module to Year 1 students, and three opted to undertake it. Currently, the course consists of three hours of contact time per week – 1 x one-hour session, and 1 x two-hour session.

Upon commencement, students were encouraged to examine the module's outline and explore the Learning Outcomes and determine which would be the most useful (although the topics themselves were already pre-established). The first few sessions on the course involved exploring/defining the 'brief', and involved students having a meeting with the head of history who provided a specific set of parameters of, in essence, what the module should bring to the department if it were to be implemented – in other words, an end goal. This was designed to help students frame their recommendations. The students also met with other professional services departments, particularly Special Collections and Archives/The Library, Careers and Employability Services (CES), and the Centre for Innovation in Education (CIE) to explore some of the wider aspects of the module, gain some pedagogic knowledge to help them to design aspects of the assessments (particularly marking criteria), and also to gain experience of operating in a 'professional' environment.

The module has three assessments: 1) a portfolio that identifies engagement with the different skills/abilities associated with history and showcases students' competencies with them (20%); 2) a reflection on some of the skills explored in the portfolio that asks students to discuss what they have learned about the process of skills' acquisition and choosing the right approach in the right context (40%); and 3) a group project to construct a curriculum policy report that evaluates the effectiveness of the module and makes recommendations as to whether the module should be expanded out into a core module for Year 2 students or not. The group project report will be presented to the wider department and its recommendations considered, marking it out as a particularly authentic form of assessment.

## Has this activity improved programme provision and student experience, and if so how?

The project has the potential to significantly improve both the programme's provision and the student experience if the recommendations made by the students to the department are useful. However, the most interesting aspect of this is that it will be a useful exercise for the department *even if the students advise against implementing the module*. Understanding the students' perspective on a module *before* it has been completed is a rarity, and provides an invaluable insight into how modules will potentially be received in future iterations of them. In terms of this year, this module has certainly improved students' experience, particularly through the arranged stakeholder meetings with SCA/the Library, CES, CIE, and the head of history, all of which provided excellent

experience of an authentic workplace setting – acting as if they were in a staff meeting. Students have also been encouraged to engage with a wider range of research skills with which they would not otherwise have interacted, and so their experience on the programme has certainly been enhanced – and it will be interesting to see whether this affects these particular students' engagement with the dissertation process when they complete Year 3.

## Did you experience any challenges in implementation? If so, how did you overcome these?

The restrictions on time and the sheer scale of the work necessary, even with only three students, was the most significant challenge. It was realised at an early stage that, as well as the sessions where students were exploring concepts, methods and approaches to history (i.e. the 'content' of the module), there also needed to be more sessions where students actively used them in a scenario- or situation-based context, and there simply is not enough time to complete both activities. For the next iteration of the module, particularly if it is to be scaled up, the contact time will be updated to four hours per week, instead of three.

The second challenge concerns what can and cannot be realistically expected of the students. The students do not possess knowledge or experience in some areas that allow them to suggest solutions to problems that they themselves identify. For example, students are not always able to comment on the effectiveness of the VLE/Canvas site simply because they are unaware of how the system itself operates, and therefore remain slightly indifferent to it. The students' pedagogic knowledge also meant that they remained limited in what they could realistically suggest in some contexts – students cannot be expected to know the ins-and-outs of marking criteria and Learning Outcomes, and so there were times where students were identifying issues with some aspects of the course, but struggled to find workable solutions. This was largely alleviated through the meeting with CIE and other external stakeholders, to provide both the professional experience, but also the professional *knowledge*, for students to be able to make effective choices and recommendations.

## How does this case study relate to the hallmarks and attributes you have selected?

Naturally, the experience on the module has significantly helped to develop the students' Confidence, both in terms of working more effectively with the fundamental skills necessary in their discipline, but also in authentic and professional contexts – particularly with external stakeholders – that they will be able to draw upon once they have graduated. This experience also ties very closely to the concept of Authentic Assessment, as the policy paper that constitutes one of the assessments will be considered in a genuine context and will be instrumental in shaping the future of the history curriculum at Liverpool. Finally, the experience on the module is inherently tied to the concept of

Research-Connected Teaching, as the entire module is geared towards improving students' research/general employability skills, and improving their performance at dissertation level and beyond.

## How could this case study be transferred to other disciplines?

The model of implementation – i.e. designing the outline of the module first and asking students to essentially act as consultants while also completing the course – is highly transferable across disciplines, and could be enacted in other subject areas. However, careful consideration should be given to the number of students that undertake it while it is still in the student-design phase, as in its current form it is unlikely to function well with a cohort size of more than 30 students split into two seminar groups of 15. A further consideration is how the module connects with *other* modules on the programme – this module uses disciplinary content studied on other modules as a way of applying the new skills and approaches discussed in this course, and fortuitously enough all of the students who opted to take this module are studying another module in common, and so this was relatively easy. With a larger cohort, where all of the students are studying different modules elsewhere, this becomes harder, and so it would be advisable to ensure that it connects to a *core* module that contains all students, so that the skills and approaches of the 'toolbox module' are applied in a common way to every student.

## If someone else were to implement the activity in your case study, what advice would you give them?

Ensure that there are at least two members of staff working on this module, as the workload is significant for one staff member. Discussion of ideas and approaches, as well as what activities the students should undertake, is invaluable and can make the module much richer. It also requires very engaged students who have a genuine desire to help improve the curriculum, and this should be made clear when offering this process out to the cohort in question.