



Oxford University Student Union

Initial Response to Oxford's Review of its Teaching Model¹

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Introduction

This report is OUSU's initial response to the SPRIG-proposed review of the university's teaching model. OUSU supports the aim to achieve a comprehensive understanding of current practice and we believe that to achieve this it is imperative to listen to the views of those receiving the teaching. There is a need to ensure that the costs of undergraduate teaching are sustainable and clearly understood. The focus of the review cannot, however, be solely based on what type of academic post-holder is delivering the teaching and how much this costs. Our response therefore predominately draws on qualitative data: the views of hundreds of undergraduate students.

We did not undertake this exercise with a view to presenting a 'wish list' to the university with regards to how undergraduate teaching should be provided. We recognize that the review of the teaching model is taking place in light of the worsening financial position which the university finds itself in. The review will, however, define long-term teaching objectives beyond the current financial circumstances and current fiscal constraints should not exclusively define its outcomes.

Our aim with this project was to shape the future development of teaching provision by investigating how students felt their teaching supported what they were hoping to gain from their education, and what their academic priorities were.

We dedicated a significant amount of time on expectations that students held, both as applicants and as undergraduates. It is vital that expectations held by students are either met by the principles governing the framework of undergraduate teaching or managed; if they are not there is an adverse effect on the student's satisfaction and learning experience. The noticeable variations between student expectations and their experiences is a significant problem for students and should be taken into consideration within this review.

After expectations we move to explaining how students feel they are developing as a result of their teaching and what they feel the teaching is not currently providing. Student's attitudes to assessment are then explored before focusing explicitly on student's views of the various modes of teaching they receive: lectures, tutorials, classes and lab sessions.

One of the most striking things to come out of the consultation was how central students see the tutorial system to their learning experience; for many it was the defining feature of an Oxford education to the point where they viewed it as synonymous with Oxford. However, critical issues were raised with the role of lectures, the misalignment between the teaching model and format of assessment and quality assurance.

We saw the review of the teaching model as an opportunity to engage students in an exercise that will have significant and far-reaching outcomes. OUSU hopes that the collegiate university will take note of the report, integrate the views of students into the review alongside the quantitative work being undertaken through analysis of OxCORT data and actively consider ways of addressing the identified critical issues that have arisen.

Integrating student opinions on what teaching should be aiming to achieve and how it should be delivered into this review will assist in defining Oxford's educational objectives and how teaching should be delivered to assist in meeting these. Many of the findings of this consultation show that potential exists for cost-savings relating to teaching to be made even while continuing to improve the teaching experience for undergraduates. We believe that this is the approach which the university should take in seeking to review its teaching model.

Methodology

We developed a qualitative focus group-based methodology for a student response to the Review of Teaching in the middle of Hilary Term 2010. The 1st week meeting of University Council in Hilary Term considered the initial proposal from SPRIG for a review of the university's teaching model, noting that "an offer from the student representatives to co-ordinate discussion with students on the teaching experience was gratefully accepted, and, in turn, the student representatives welcomed the proposal that teaching norms be developed to inform student expectations". OUSU's experience in recent years has been that qualitative discussions of the student learning experience can be highly valuable. Student-led 'academic feedback sessions' began being used as a means of collecting student feedback in colleges in the 2007/08 academic year and have spread to many colleges since. The Quality Assurance Working Group recently noted that such subject feedback mechanisms were an example of good practice within colleges for students being able to provide feedback on their tutors.

Although references to information extrapolated from student surveys are interspersed within this report we designed a qualitative consultative methodology to enable a more in depth exploration of the student experience of learning. Through surveys such as the NSS and Student Barometer we have a wealth of statistical evidence relating to how students experience Oxford and did not intend to duplicate this. This report, and the methodology on which it was based, is not designed to be 'statistically significant', although it does reflect the experiences of hundreds of Oxford's undergraduates. It is instead intended to provide a level of detail that quantitative studies do not permit. A focus-group based methodology enabled us to make use of existing relationships with Junior Common Room committees who were responsible for running and making notes on focus groups in colleges. After consulting with Junior Common Rooms on which questions should be put to students we worked with the Oxford Learning Institute on developing our methodology and the structure of focus groups (making use of academic literature on effective running of focus groups). We then provided training to Junior Common Room representatives running focus groups on how this could most effectively be done and what the purpose of discussions with students on this issue was.

Given the university's governance structure and focus of the Review of Teaching each Junior Common Room that ran focus groups was asked to run them for students in each of the four Academic Divisions. Focus groups ran in Corpus Christi, Magdalen, New, Queen's, St. Catherine's, St. Hilda's, St. John's, St. Peter's, Trinity and University Colleges. In total over 400 students attended a focus group in their college (not every college ran focus groups in all four Divisions, primarily because of the time-intensive nature of running focus groups for those doing them and the expedited timeframe in which it was asked that they take place). While this consultative exercise focused exclusively on undergraduate students we are interested to see the Review of Teaching include postgraduate taught students (in common with the university) and we will be consulting them on their views of teaching in the future. The questions which were asked in focus groups is Annexe E to this paper.

Student Response

The success of our response was dependent upon students engaging with the review. We wanted our response to reflect the views of as many undergraduates as possible given the timeframe within which we were operating. The initial response from JCR presidents was tremendously positive; they believed that it was vital that views and experiences of the students in their JCRs were included in the review. While some presidents were concerned about the time commitment in the first couple of weeks of Trinity Term there was an overwhelming sense that this project was sufficiently important to students to merit time being spent in developing a response to it.

Even allowing for the importance which JCR officers attached to this review, we were surprised at the sustained level of engagement from students which the project enjoyed. Every focus group featured at least two (and frequently more) members of Junior Common Room committees who were willing to run and make notes on the focus group and then write them up within 24 hours of the focus group taking place. Assuming 90 minutes per focus group, there were approximately 60 hours of focus groups across ten colleges in the first two weeks of Trinity Term with a further significant time commitment coming through organising, promoting and writing up each focus group. The weekend of 0th to 1st week of Trinity Term featured training in running focus groups held in OUSU with over 40 students attending over two days. About half a dozen committee members from a JCR that has been disaffiliated from OUSU for several years came to the training and subsequently, after running a trial focus group for students in the Humanities Division, consulted all four Divisions, speaking to around 50 students. These focus groups typically ended at about 10:15pm.

What was striking was not only the numbers at some of the focus groups (some groups included around 25 students) but also the level of engagement of the students once the questions got underway. We spoke to students from all year groups and the majority of undergraduate courses. Students would frequently remain behind after focus groups to ask questions about the review of teaching and associated topics, with discussions including an hour long discussion on higher education funding at the end of one focus group for Social Sciences students.

At the end of the sessions we attended we asked how the students would like us to feed back all the views we had gathered and the conclusions of the report. Over the next few weeks this report will be communicated to all students via email and will be sent out via JCR mailing lists. More significantly, we have been asked by several colleges to go to JCR meetings to talk directly about this report with students and take questions from them. Students are eager to continue the dialogue between OUSU and JCRs over the review of the teaching model and are keen to continue shaping the review as it progresses.

Critical Issues

Below we outline the critical issues that we see as surfacing from the consultation. We highlight an issue if it appeared in numerous focus groups, if it had a significantly detrimental effect on the quality of students' educational experiences or if the issue could be resolved relatively easily with little cost, but potentially a large increase in the benefit which students would experience.

Effect that tutors have on a student's learning experience

Students overwhelmingly confirmed the widely held view that the tutorial system is the jewel in Oxford's crown. The nature of the tutorial system is such that the tutor has a great influence over the style and method of teaching. This is confirmed by the instinctual reaction many students had when asked about the ingredients of a good tutorial or lecture; the name of an academic was frequently their immediate response. When students are receiving teaching from world-class academics Oxford's teaching model often delivers world-class teaching. It must, however, be borne in mind that the ability to teach does not necessarily follow on from being a world class researcher and the effect that this has on a student's educational experience can be significant.

Students consistently voiced worry at a lack of consistency at the quality of tutors' provision of teaching. While the tutorial system was believed to be the best way to deliver teaching it was felt that many tutors' teaching did not match expectations. This was alarming to students who did not expect this to be an issue at Oxford. While this did not seem to hamper students from realising what they hoped to gain from their Oxford education the prevailing view was that such inconsistency was greater than was acceptable.

It is clear that there is a certain amount of consensus over what students perceived as the ingredients of good teaching although this notably varied by mode of provision. Students wanted to develop their views in tutorials, engage in what they were being told in lectures, participate in interactive learning in classes and combine practical skills with theoretical knowledge in lab sessions. While this summary provides a brief overview, students in focus groups effectively proposed teaching norms which could form a common framework for teaching that would improve existing levels of provision and match student expectations.

While we accept that much of Oxford's strength lies in its diversity of provision, students felt that this should not be at the expense of guaranteed quality. We do not believe that a common framework for teaching would be expensive beyond existing costs or restrictive of the freedom of academics to teach in the manner they deem best. Instead we anticipate that norms underpinning any common framework would be derived from the excellent teaching already happening within the university.

Lack of innovation and flexibility in the teaching model

The teaching model in many courses is well established and clearly produces high levels of academic quality. This is reflected in students' satisfaction with what they were gaining from their Oxford education, the numbers of students who continue to further study and the long-term prospects of Oxford graduates.

While students were broadly satisfied with the skills they were gaining through teaching, two deficiencies were repeatedly mentioned; presentation and practical skills. It was felt that the teaching model furnished students with the ability to present arguments coherently in a small group setting but many students indicated that they would be uncomfortable presenting information to a large group. We were surprised by the number of students that emphasised this point and believe it to be likely that such emphasis is linked to the perceived need to display presentation skills in order to secure and excel in graduate careers which many Oxford graduates enter.

Another aspect that students felt the current teaching model frequently wasn't providing was practical experience. Although students valued developing a comprehensive grasp of the theory that lay behind their subject, with several students mentioning that this was one of the reasons they wanted to study at Oxford at the point of application, many indicated that they saw the potential for there to be a greater practical element to teaching. This was frequently explained as a desire to gain "hands on experience" or wanting life "beyond the bubble" to be integrated into teaching to a greater degree. This view was prevalent in every Division but students in Social Sciences and Medical Sciences found the lack of innovation particularly constraining.

A frustration was voiced by students across the Divisions was that the ability to develop a meaningful understanding of topics being covered was often sacrificed due to the inflexibility of the teaching system. Students rarely complained about the inherent quantity of work they were given or the number of hours which they were expected to work. Students instead queried whether it was desirable for them to frequently only have time to skim the texts on reading lists. Many students questioned the way in which they felt that the teaching system prioritised students completing large quantities of work even at the expense of the quality of work and felt that this left them "jumping hurdles, just going through the motions." Humanities and Social Science students in particular made comments such as "I used to enjoy reading before I came here, now I don't get any pleasure out of reading at all, there's never enough time, it's all just too rushed." Students in MPLS often reported feeling that they only had a superficial grasp of the material because of the volume of work they were expected to complete; this led to frustration in some cases with some students in focus groups questioning as to whether they wished to continue to further study.

Misalignment of the teaching model with the examination system.

This was an issue that was raised in a clear majority of focus groups although the dissatisfaction was felt most greatly by Social Sciences and Humanities students. Students frequently reported that they felt the work they were asked to produce for tutorials was unnecessarily dissimilar to the media in which they were assessed at FHS. The most common initial response in Humanities and Social Sciences focus groups to the question "What skills do you believe you need to succeed in examinations at Oxford" was "I don't know". Commonly students believed that "confidence and the ability to write aggressively" was what got them the highest marks but felt that large amounts of revision wouldn't necessarily provide them with this ability

Students in these Divisions understood in the abstract the skills that they gained during the course of their teaching - thinking on their feet, developing a coherent argument and critical analysis - should help them in examinations. There was, however, a good deal of frustration at how difficult this was to do in practice. There was a strong sense that students did not know "what a first class essay would look like" in an examination setting or how they would produce one in under an hour. It was felt that the mismatch between developing an argument over a week, and taking several hours to write the essay, and having to develop a coherent argument in less than an hour was unnecessary and that the style of teaching could be altered to reduce this mismatch. This issue was not so prominent in either Medical Sciences or MPLS. Students in both of these Divisions felt that the manner of work that they produced for classes and tutorials was broadly similar to what was expected of them in exams.

One step towards addressing this problem would be a greater link between summative and formative assessment. While students are keen to understand the criteria against which their final examinations are assessed, this should be integrated into the existing strengths of the teaching model including the extensive quantity of oral feedback which students are frequently given. The clear delineation which currently often exists between summative and formative assessment is artificial in many ways and bridging it would address many of the concerns outlined later in this report.

Levels of anxiety over what the university requires of its students

The final take-out point which was raised in a majority of focus groups involved deep anxiety at what students were expected to achieve or what steps they should take to improve the quality of their work. This issue arose in a range of questions but was particularly apparent when students were asked about examinations. Anxiety manifested itself partially in terms of students being uncertain as to whether they could achieve what they deemed to be a necessary standard of work as comments such as "No-one ever tells you how to do better; just that you're going wrong" demonstrate. It was, however, also very apparent that students were deeply concerned that they were unclear about the criteria against which they would be assessed and that they felt that they had received little information about how best to achieve what was expected of them.

This problem was linked to one associated with feedback, with students frequently indicating that they were primarily keen on receiving feedback so that they could improve their work and - importantly - to monitor how their work was developing over the course of a paper. Some students commented that "I would read out my essay at the beginning of the tutorial and the discussion would be centred on the themes I included but I got no feedback on the structure of the essay." The lack of summative assessment was noted by students in all four Divisions but was particularly focused on in Humanities and Social Sciences. Students felt that work was assessed against published marking criteria too infrequently given the importance of public examinations, with collections often not being seen as a sufficient method of providing summative feedback.

Further Work

Given the nature of the Review of Teaching, much of the development of teaching norms can only take place subsequent to the analysis of data from OxCORT and other sources which is currently taking place. The information which we have gathered does, however, point in certain directions. This is true both in terms of future consultative work and in terms of reducing costs associated with teaching. A point which is true across Divisions is that students have a broad understanding of different styles of teaching leading to different skills being developed. Although students regularly outlined examples of good practice within teaching and what manner of teaching they believed to be most effective, it was clear that they frequently valued tutorials above classes and lectures. Controlling costs of undergraduate teaching should be significantly developed with consideration being given to what manner of teaching students believe to be most valuable². On the basis of comments made ideas worth exploring include:

- The role of lectures within courses. Students frequently made reference to listening to lectures given at other universities online, particularly in the run-up to examinations. They also expressed frustration at the lack of information provided online for many lecture courses. Given the willingness of students to make use of online learning resources, and the fact that lectures were - in some ways - felt to be inherently flawed in terms of difficulties with hearing lecturers and other physical barriers to learning, work should be done on exploring costs associated with lecture provision with a view to reducing these if possible. Given the common views across Divisions as to what the components of a good lecture are, detailed thought should be given as to how best to disseminate these views to lecturers across the university.
- Reducing the number of 'one one one' tutorials. These tutorials were frequently felt to be less satisfying and useful than those involving tutorial partners. Students frequently stated that they enjoyed a tutorial most when other students were present owing to the greater levels of discussion and debate which took place. This style of learning is, by definition, not possible in singleton tutorials. Given the cost of singleton tutorials consideration should be given as to how the number of such tutorials can be reduced.
- Modifying the model used for laboratory-based teaching. Comments on lab-based teaching within MPLS and Medical Sciences were frequently negative, with students feeling that the labwork was often excessively long and that such teaching could be most effectively delivered by graduate students owing to the greater levels of enthusiasm which they exhibited for this method of teaching. Given these findings we feel that work could usefully be undertaken to consider how best to ensure that laboratory work is meeting student expectations as to what could usefully be contained within it.
- Greater provision being made for tutor development. Students explaining what constituted a good tutorial or class often outlined the role which tutors have in facilitating discussion, both in terms of ensuring that discussions had a purpose and to encourage participation from all students attending. Conversely, students outlining what they considered to be the characteristics of a "bad tutorial" frequently said that a lack of structure within the tutorial was deeply frustrating. Given these facts

² It is clear that variations in models for teaching provision will take place across different degree courses depending on the academic objectives of the individual course.

and the frequent observations that leading researchers do not necessarily make excellent teachers, we believe that consideration should be given as to how best opportunities for tutor development can be continued and promoted. The emphasis which students in Humanities and Social Sciences placed on the role of the tutor in ensuring that all students are engaging in tutorials and classes was a stand-out point from focus groups, with it also being observed that this was by no means a natural skill-set for many tutors.

- Ensuring a greater alignment of the teaching model and format of examinations. This point was made particularly frequently in the Humanities & Social Sciences but was also raised in the other Divisions. Students made frequent reference to being uncertain what they were meant to be doing in examinations, with this being directly linked to the comparatively infrequent opportunities for summative assessment which exist within many degree courses. Collections were not felt to be an adequate method of such assessment, both because of the lack of seriousness with which it was felt that they were sometimes taken, but also because of the experience of many students that collections would either be returned late or with minimal feedback on. Students felt that mechanisms such as the release of 'model answers' by degree classification, greater access to examination scripts and more opportunities to practice exam-style writing would help remedy this problem. It was also frequently recognised that the learning environment at Oxford was dramatically different to that at schools, meaning that it was particularly important for study skills to be fully integrated into courses. Skills which people mentioned as being particularly useful included essay-writing, note-taking and presentation-based skills.

Annexe A: Humanities

Expectations pre-application and how they are being matched.

As with most other Divisions students felt that they had only a basic understanding of Oxford's teaching system prior to applying. Although people broadly expected 'tutorials' people were uncertain as to what format these would take and - particularly - how many tutorial partners they would have. It was frequently felt that people had applied to Oxford on reputational grounds with the teaching system being synonymous with this. When asked about the extent to which the system of teaching had impacted the decisions of students to apply, typical responses included "Oxford was always portrayed as being synonymous with the tutorial system" and "Oxbridge is tutorials". Few students made reference to either classes or lectures in spite of the role which these play in delivering undergraduate teaching.

Students identified several areas where their expectations had both been matched and mismatched by the realities of teaching which they were receiving. Generally speaking students believed that the expectations of their teaching had been reasonably successfully matched by the teaching which they had received. The crucial points where students felt that their expectations were not being matched included:

- Variability in the perceived ability of tutors to teach. Comments such as "Being a great academic doesn't necessarily mean you'll be a great tutor" and "I thought there would be a lot more about debate...but in most of my tutorials the tutor peddles a line and expects you to go along with it" were comparatively common.
- The sheer weight of work which students received (this was most notable among Modern Linguists). This was expressed through concern that students felt they were "skimming the surface" of all the topics, feeling that "speed-reading and speed-typing" were excessively important. It was felt that the extent of material found on reading lists meant that it could be difficult to identify what work you should be doing.
- Course organisation. This was again particularly apparent in Modern Languages (most likely as a result of the wide range of courses offered within the Faculty). It was felt that some papers were heavily disorganised, with it not being clear who was taking ultimate responsibility for ensuring that necessary teaching was delivered.
- Contact time. People often felt that they were expecting more tutorials at the point of application than they were getting and that the experience of learning was often quite isolating owing to a comparative lack of structured contact hours with both students and academics.

When asked what they were hoping to gain from their Oxford education prior to arriving in Oxford Humanities students were more likely to make reference to the perceived inherent academic benefit of studying their subject than students from any other Division. One focus group discussed at length their disappointment that the system is inevitably based around final examinations, with people wanting to spend more time developing their own ideas. Other focus groups emphasised that they "wanted our education to be more than a means to an end". This holistic view of what students wished to gain from their education was mirrored in comments which made reference to Oxford as an environment where students can take part in a broad range of other activities and meet other

undergraduates who are passionate about learning. This excitement about Oxford as a place was manifested in comments such as “The whole place has an aura of intensity to it” and frequent references to extra-curricular activities.

Other comments made were similar to those found in other Divisions, with emphasis being put on students’ hopes that they would develop a more concise style of arguing and debating, have greater flexibility post-graduating as a result of having a degree from Oxford and that they would enjoy access to leading academics.

What skills students feel that they are developing

Responses to this question overwhelmingly focussed on speed of work as being the single greatest skill which students felt they were developing. This was mentioned both explicitly (with students mentioning time-management or developing thoughts quickly) and implicitly (through references to having to think ‘on your feet’ in tutorials. Arguments were made both in favour and against of this method of learning. Many students thought that these skills made them more resilient as “we have no choice but to work”. People also felt that the intense learning environment improved their willingness to argue with other students and tutors in tutorials as you were compelled to both present and defend your argument in the face of criticism. The idea that learning to cope with high pressure was an important skill was frequently referred to by many students.

An alternative interpretation of these broadly positive ideas was also put forward, with many focus groups containing students who argued that they were mainly learning how to get through work as quickly as possible without fully understanding it in the depth that they would like. Although rapidly “absorbing information and making an argument from it” was seen as important it was seen as frequently coming through systems like a “wikipedia knowledge of philosophers”. Other phrases used to vocalise this view included that you were mainly learning “to produce literally thousands of words per week”, that it’s “mainly style over substance” and that people were “learning to blag their way out of an argument”. The question of transferable skills was frequently addressed, with many students believing that they were developing these and that this was particularly important for students in Humanities courses at university.

Although this point is covered further in the ‘examinations’ section below many students discussed confidence and the extent to which they were developing this without prompting. There was an intersection between the quantity of work which students have to do, the tutorial environment, and a sense that while some students developed self-confidence as a result of academic achievement, that confidence was a necessary skill to develop in order to fully succeed on your course.

What students feel teaching is not currently providing

There was a broad range of responses to this question. As outlined above, the most prevalent theme was that students felt that they had too much work to meaningfully absorb much of the information with which they were presented. This was illustrated through comments as “I don’t think that I’m going to come out of this course with an in depth understanding - lots of factual information but no perspective on the bigger picture”.

Other key themes included:

- Students on joint honours courses feeling that they were frequently poorly organised and at times “more of a tension than a complement”.
- Respondents stating that they didn't feel they were getting presentation skills, with these being particularly important in increasing numbers of graduate recruitment processes. This tied in with a sense that interpersonal skills were not being actively developed as humanities courses typically featured comparatively little contact time and a greater emphasis on individual study. This relates to the following point regarding study skills - the responsibilities which courses within the Humanities Division place on individual students come with a greater burden on students to structure their own learning effectively.
- Study Skills. A recurrent theme in many questions across Divisions was that students were uncertain as to how exactly they were meant to be working. Comments such as “No-one ever tells you how to do better, just that you're going wrong” were comparatively frequent, even when prefaced with a recognition that learning at university was designed to follow a very different methodology to learning at school. Unprompted ideas for study skills support which emerged from focus groups include assistance essay-writing, how to effectively express ideas and greater guidance as to what information was deemed to be essential ahead of exams.
- Modern Languages. Modern linguists were notably vocal in multiple colleges on this question, making repeated comments about what they felt to be deficiencies in language teaching. It was felt that linguists recognised at the point of application that the Oxford course was different in that it placed more of an emphasis on literature. Linguists were, however, frustrated with what they thought was at times an impossible amount of reading to do and a sense that their language skills were regressing prior to going on a year abroad. Those linguists who had been on a year abroad typically felt that it was unstructured to the point that the onus was totally on them to emerge from it with language skills which had diminished in the preceding two years. Comments on this issue included “I don't speak any more in language classes as I don't think I can speak the language I'm studying anymore” and “I literally can't speak French anymore” with these views being representative of many linguists whom attended focus groups.

Examinations & Assessment

As outlined in the overview of results, one of the most frequent comments in focus groups was that students did not feel there was any clear link between the manner in which they were taught and the manner in which they were assessed. This feeling was most apparent in the Humanities Division. It was not felt that the experience of writing regular tutorial essays adequately prepared students for writing shorter, timed essays in an examination setting. Ideas mooted for how to address this included having long essays split into shorter topics in a manner which would promote broader thinking about, for example, a period in history. It was also thought that it was unclear as to what students were expected to do in exams. Several students expressed a wish for 'model answers' to be made available within degree classes in order to give them a better understanding of what essays which would regularly score over 70 would involve. In more than one focus group the immediate response of students asked this question was to respond with “I don't know” with discussion then focusing on the perceived variation between the teaching model and examination system, including the fact that attendees felt that methods of summative assessment were largely dependent on the whims of individual tutors owing to unclear assessment criteria.

The overall sense among students whom were asked what skills they felt were necessary to succeed in exams is that the answers which they gave only referred by inference to the university's teaching model (e.g it being important to assert your views both in tutorials and examinations). Frequently given answers included:

- The ability to write rapidly as there was not enough time in exams to both think and write.
- Confidence and the ability to deal with large amounts of pressure for a sustained period of time.
- Revising strategically, with examples of this including paying close attention to past papers and comparatively little attention to what had been covered in tutorials on the grounds that exam questions would almost certainly be very different to these topics.

The issue of the gender gap in certain FHS subjects was also mentioned in several focus groups (any mention was completely unprompted by those running the focus groups). Points made on the finals gap included that some tutors mentioned it in the runup to exams to encourage female students to revise and write in more 'masculine' ways, These points were made in several colleges and it was striking that female students in particular would mention the gender gap at finals, advance ideas as to what caused it, and discuss how they felt their tutors were responding to it.

Specific methods of teaching

Lectures: Lectures were widely seen as a comparatively ineffectual method of teaching under current arrangements. A frequently made point was that a good lecture was "interactive", with clear handouts and Powerpoint presentations encouraging students to think and make their own notes on details which were provided by lecturers. There were a range of practical problems with lectures which were identified. These included many spaces used for lectures being unsuitable and lecturers frequently failing to give the impression that they had planned the structure of their lecture - there was a dominant sense that students did not want lectures merely to be used as a means of communicating a great deal of information without the ideas behind facts being explained..

In common with other Divisions there was near unanimity that more information should be placed online, with students being able to download lecture notes and - if possible - podcasts. Humanities students were comparatively likely to mention named lecturers as being particularly good, implying that good lecturers were memorable and that, if done well, lectures could be seen as being valuable additions to other methods of teaching. While lectures were frequently criticised, participants regularly noted that it was possible for lectures to be useful but that this happened comparatively rarely. There was a broad sense that other Divisions were better at using electronic media (such as Powerpoint and placing notes online) than Humanities. Although the individual doing the lecture has an important role to play, it was felt that measures such as these and ensuring that lectures were held in suitable rooms would dramatically improve student views of and attendance at lectures.

Tutorials: As with all Divisions, there was a very broad-ranging discussion as to what constituted both good and bad tutorials. The main points made in Humanities were:

- The benefits of tutorials with 2 or 3 students in allowed both for discussion to develop and conflicting views to be aired. While this was possible in 'one on one' tutorials the intellectual gap between student and tutor existed to such an extent that tutorials could be intimidating in such an

environment. There was a broad sense that students wanted tutorials to be academically challenging and that excessive numbers of students attending tutorials would prevent this from happening.

- There was a strong sense that tutorials with too many students in could barely be called tutorials. Students felt that a key purpose of the tutorial was the individual attention which you could get from an academic and the potential for discussion to develop. Large numbers of students in a tutorial mitigated against this as did a scenario where students had prepared essays on different topics which prevented interaction between students from developing.
- Feedback was frequently discussed with people feeling that they wanted “enough feedback for what they have written”. Some focus groups got into a more protracted discussion of this with the difference between summative and formative assessment being raised. It was felt that collections were frequently returned late and with comparatively little written feedback in addition to the marks awarded. Given this people wanted feedback on tutorials to give a sense of how they were progressing towards exams, with most students feeling that as FHS exams had such a large weighting placed on them more should be done to inform students of how they well prepared they were for their exams.
- It was notable that students understood the differences between tutorials, lectures and classes. While students responding to ‘what teaching is not currently providing’ made reference to presentation skills, the same students felt that they did not want presentations in tutorials. There was a strong sense that these were best placed in classes with larger number of students than in tutorials with fewer students. In the same way there was a notable aversion to students having to read essays out in tutorials as it was felt that this reduced useful contact time.
- Students frequently argued that the personalised nature of the tutorial system meant that it was not acceptable for tutors to teach regardless of the individual interests and characteristics of their students. In a similar vein recurrent points were made about the important role which tutors have in structuring tutorials. This is true both in the sense that tutorials should be working towards a particular goal, but also in that students frequently said that one of the most frustrating things about tutorials could be sharing them either with a student who was exceptionally talkative, or with a student who barely said anything. It was felt that there was a role for the tutor in limiting these two extremes.
- It was striking that students, when asked what constituted a ‘bad tutorial’, would talk more frequently about the dynamics between students than about the performance of the tutor. This heavily implies that there is an important role for the tutor in ensuring that dynamics between tutorial partners lead to effective learning on all sides, given the significance which students attach to these dynamics. This work could include carefully determining which students to place in tutorials together and ensuring that respectful dynamics exist between students.

Classes: The most frequently mentioned point with regard to classes in Humanities was that of interactivity. Unlike in tutorials people felt that presentations followed by prolonged group discussion were valuable, and the core purpose of what a successful class should be. As with lectures effective handouts were felt to be particularly important in order to provide a structure to the class and to prevent it from ‘drifting’. There were similar points made as in the discussion on tutorials to what the role of a tutor could be - this involved both structuring the discussion and also ensuring that all

students were participating in the class. Students felt that this would be valuable both from the perspective of their learning but also to make sure that all students were pulling their weight - the description in one focus group of students who failed to prepare for classes as "breaking the academic contract" was greeted with agreement from other participants. A minority of students felt strongly that the classes which they had attended had not been successful, largely because the purpose behind the classes had been unclear.

Annexe B: Social Sciences

Expectations pre-application and how they are being matched.

Student understanding of the teaching system and the extent to which it impacted the decision to apply to Oxford was comparatively limited with the situation in Social Sciences being most similar to that found in Humanities. More so than in any other Division Social Sciences students were focused on the reputation of Oxford prior to applying. Common comments when explaining why they had applied to Oxford included, "its reputation, and teaching is part of that", "not so much the teaching but more the reputation" and "a lot of it is about reputation".

Social Science students typically identified a greater mismatch between their expectations of teaching prior to coming to Oxford and the teaching which they were receiving. Some students felt that teaching was less structured than they had expected, with one focus group agreeing that an accurate description was that the structure of teaching was "very, very informal". The recurrent point about confused administration of joint courses was frequently mentioned with regard to PPE. Although the variability in teaching proficiency between tutors was mentioned in all Divisions and in response to various questions students in the Social Sciences were more likely to perceive tutors as being comparatively uninterested in undergraduate teaching, through comments such as "I thought they all really care about teaching but they don't" and "I expected all the teachers to be amazing but there's a large variety". There were few other points made which were specific to Social Sciences with regard to this question - more so than in any other Division responses to this question in focus groups focused near-exclusively on the sense that some tutors were not interested in undergraduate teaching but preferred to focus on other areas. The only other point which was made regularly in Social Science focus groups on this issue was that students had applied expecting more lectures than they actually received.

As with other Divisions the most immediate response to the question of what students were hoping to gain from their Oxford education prior to arriving in Oxford was "a degree". The main point of variation within Social Sciences was that students were more likely than in Humanities to talk about career progression and the inherent opportunities for rapid promotion into desirable jobs which a degree from Oxford offered (a particularly apt summary of this trend within the Division was the comment from one student that their degree was an "opportunities gateway"). This contrasts with the focus on the inherent academic benefit of studying at Oxford which Humanities students were more likely to note. As with the other Divisions, students in Social Sciences also made frequent reference to the prestigious nature of an Oxford education, the confidence which could be developed through the tutorial system and the substantive knowledge gained through an Oxford degree.

What skills students feel that they are developing

The discussion here was similar to that found within the Humanities Division. Students typically felt that they were developing confidence as a result of Oxford's teaching system in addition to other related skills such as the ability to engage in challenging tasks and participate in discussions with rapid amounts of preparation. As in Humanities people saw both upsides and downsides to the skills which they saw themselves as developing. The feeling that they were learning to rapidly process work without fully understanding it was not as pronounced as it was in Humanities focus groups but comments such as "I feel that I'm getting very good at asserting statements without having a lot of

supporting information” were nevertheless comparatively frequent. In both Humanities and Social Sciences it appeared to be the case that students felt that “blagging” was a skill which was inevitably picked up over the course of an undergraduate degree, in spite of the fact that they did not see this as being necessarily a desirable part of their learning experience. Students in Social Sciences, particularly in Law, were more likely to give concrete examples in response to this question than were students in Humanities. Several focus groups reported they felt that even when their courses had little clear practical use the manner in which they were learning theoretical knowledge (with law students particularly feeling this) was a superior way of learning than would be found in other Russell Group universities.

What students feel teaching is not currently providing

There were three main points within this section, some of which were replicated in other Divisions:

- Presentation skills. As in Humanities students felt that presentation skills would be valuable, particularly in later life, but did not think that they had the opportunity to develop these within the Oxford teaching system. Like Humanities students, attendees at Social Sciences focus groups did not think that presentations would work well within tutorials but did think that they could be more useful within a class. People also drew distinctions between ‘group work’ and ‘joint work’, the latter being students working together preparing for a tutorial, the former being class-based work which requires students to develop skills around working in a team. Other examples of ‘practical skills’ were particularly referred to by lawyers. While recognising that the nature of Law at Oxford is different to other universities, several focus groups made reference to feeling that Law here is “separate to the real world”, arguing that the theoretical approach existing at Oxford made it harder for undergraduate lawyers to understand the real world. This gap between practical skills and theoretical knowledge is exemplary of multiple points which were made in focus groups across the Divisions.
- Students made frequent reference to the need for study skills support, particularly with reference to exams and understanding the criteria against which they are assessed (this included feedback with people feeling that not being told what aspects of their work needed improvement meant that they were not able to advance academically). It was felt that more collections and opportunities for marked work would be useful in improving this situation. Students frequently said that they did “simply not understand” what would be likely to come up in examinations and noted the mismatch between teaching and examinations which students in other Divisions also did.
- As in Humanities students noted the rapid speed at which they had to work and felt that this level of work came with disadvantages. This point was not as frequently made as it was by Humanities students but it was nevertheless emphasised that the workload and expectation of working over vacations meant that it was next to impossible to develop academic interests outside of the comparatively narrow papers which students were taking at any given point.

Examinations & Assessment

As outlined earlier, many students felt that it was deeply unclear as to what they were expected to do in examinations. Although students felt that independent thought and focusing beyond reading lists would be rewarded, it was also thought that there were “no objective standards” within courses and that confusing guidance was frequently given as to how students should be expected to work. Points

about study skills support recur throughout Social Sciences and these were also notable in this section, with students feeling that the exam system “seems quite selective for those who are naturally good at exams - technique is often left out of the teaching”. The mismatch between tutorial teaching and examination system was discussed in detail, with comments made including surprise at the fact that “we’re never ever asked to write an essay in 45 minutes and suddenly we just have to know how to do it” and dissatisfaction at the way that “how you structure a tutorial essay has too little of a relationship with the way of assessment”.

Students attending focus groups within the Social Sciences Division frequently prefaced feelings of dissatisfaction in this area with sentiments such as “of course no one wants exams in Oxford to be about A-Level style jumping through hoops”; there was a recognition that exams should be challenging and students did not dispute this. There was nevertheless a sense that a middle ground could be found which would provide students with a greater sense as to what would be expected of them in exams. Specific ideas for helping students understand the exam system better included improved feedback, including the return of examination scripts, and the release of ‘model answers’ for different degree classifications to demonstrate what sort of work would typically be rewarded. It was felt that tutors could be unnecessarily reluctant to discuss exams, with students feeling that this could step from a lack of clarity even among exam markers as to what they were looking for in answers.

Multiple focus groups explicitly discussed the gender gap which emerges in certain subjects at FHS Level. Points raised included assertions that “there is a huge gender divide” and that students would be rewarded for “writing like a man”. There was also a notable view when this discussion arose - from both genders - that “I think it’s about taking a stance, not a gender”. Discussion of gender differences arose regularly in this section in both Humanities and Social Sciences, with there being a broad view that exams could be compared to a performance with “some tutors preferring style over substance”. It was felt that this would benefit men who were more likely to take a firm stance in examinations. Discussions about gender frequently polarised both in terms of style and content. Although descriptions of what was needed to succeed in examinations included phrases such as “go out guns blazing” and “it’s as much about confidence as what you say” from both genders, there were noticeable differences in how men and women described the skills which they believed were necessary. In speaking to over 100 students within the Social Sciences Division there was a clear pattern of men speaking about the examination system with a degree of relish which was lacking from a female description of the exam process.

Lectures: The main sentiments stated with regard to lectures diverged little from those expressed by undergraduates across all Divisions. There was regret expressed in several focus groups about a pervasive feeling among students that lectures are not useful in spite of the fact that they can be. People generally felt that the variability of lecture quality, combined with them being optional, meant that it was easier for students to lose interest in them than other methods of teaching. It was strongly believed that streaming lectures or providing lecture notes online would both increase interest in lectures and enable students to get more out of them provided that notes were not so comprehensive as to discourage listening to or attending the entire lecture. As with other Divisions it was thought that lectures being based around an argument rather than merely recounting facts provided a valuable perspective and made it more likely that students would attend.

Tutorials: The main points with regard to what constituted good/bad tutorials were as follows:

- Tutorial sizes of two or three people were typically felt to be ideal. Tutorials involving more than 4 students were thought likely to leave certain students behind as more talkative students made use of the limited time available to engage in a dialogue with each other and the tutor. There was also an overall feeling against one on one tutorials - both on the grounds that they could turn into an excessive opportunity for the tutor to set the tone of the tutorial but also as it limited the discussion which could take place between tutorial partners.
- Feedback was seen as particularly important with students wanting a “definite idea of how you are doing” from tutors. This could include consistent pointers towards examinations, specifically on how tutorial work could be turned into an essay in an exam. Tutorials were seen both as an opportunity for student progress to be measured but also for ideas to be discussed - there was a clear sense that tutorials focussed on “facts and figures” would miss the point of what a tutorial could offer. Feedback could include comparative information even if marks were not actually given, e.g students being told how they were doing relative to previous weeks so that they were able to track progress over the course of a term. It was, however, thought that marks would be particularly useful both to incentivise students performing poorly but also to avoid the scenario where tutors “are telling you loads of stuff but not how to go about improving your work”. A potential intersection between oral and written feedback was seen whereby “comments could essentially explain why the mark is there”.
- As with Humanities, particular problems could stem from tutorial partners who were either excessively quiet or excessively talkative to the point that other voices got drowned out. It was felt that tutors had a strong role to play in shutting down discussion and steering the tutorial. This would not take place through excessive prescription over what would be discussed but rather by injecting ideas into the discussion including on technique in essays and exams. The most consistent point which arose across focus groups in the Division is that students wanted to be able to set the overall direction of the tutorial, with tutors making sure that everyone was included and that the discussion stayed relevant to the question. A consensus emerged that while “passion for the subject is very important, passion for teaching is even more important”. This would involve making sure that the tutorial functioned as a valuable academic exercise, with students strongly feeling that the best tutorials would leave them thinking about what had been covered at the end.

Classes: The main difference expressed by students on the differences between tutorials and classes is that the former allowed opportunities for discussion and learning, whereas the latter could be more explicitly focused upon teaching. An identified danger within classes was that it would be possible for students to go through them without speaking at any given point. In accordance with this students made a similar point as they had with regard to tutorials; that tutors leading the class would need to marshal the conversation particularly effectively. This would be harder and more important in classes as larger numbers of students would be present, meaning that it would be easier for discussion to be comparatively aimless with a minority of students not actively participating. Owing to the centrality of the tutorial within Oxford's teaching system concern was expressed that classes were occasionally not taken particularly seriously by students, even if there was no apparent reason as to why this would be the case. This was felt to make it important that classes offered a clear purpose and complementary style of learning to tutorials, and that both tutors and students were clear on the objectives of a class.

Annexe C: Maths, Physical & Life Sciences

Expectations pre-application and how they are being matched.

As in Humanities & Social Sciences students in MPLS typically did not know a great deal about the university's teaching model prior to application. There was an understanding that teaching would be delivered through tutorials and that this would take place in small groups but understanding of how many students would be in tutorials and the roles of classes, practicals and lectures all varied. When asked about the extent to which the system of teaching impacted upon the decision to apply to Oxford there was a slight variation in the response of MPLS students compared with those students in the Humanities & Social Sciences Divisions. Although students continued to overwhelmingly indicate that they primarily applied to Oxford as a result of the university's reputation, students in MPLS typically made fewer references to Oxford's reputation being inherently interlinked with the tutorial system of teaching than did their counterparts in other Divisions. Unlike in other Divisions there was a minority of students who responded that they were marginally put off applying by the reputation of the tutorial system and its emphasis on what could appear to be a confrontational learning environment.

When asked about expectations of teaching being matched against the reality of teaching and aspirations from an Oxford education responses were more mixed than in any other Division. Students in MPLS split between arguing that their courses were flexible and allowed intellectual specialisation in a manner that they enjoyed, with others saying that they found the course unnecessarily restrictive. Opinions were similarly split on the quality of the teaching itself. Some focus groups commented critically on teaching in a way which was not present in other Divisions, with a particular focus on lectures. Although students in other Divisions were critical of lectures this primarily took place in the context of students noting that lectures had the potential to be incredibly valuable. This was less the case in MPLS, possibly as a result of the greater number of lectures which take place in MPLS subjects meaning that students have more experience of lecture-based teaching. A particular point to highlight which emerged from multiple focus groups relates to the example of good practice within the Physics Department and its requirement for feedback on lectures. Students felt that not only did this give them an opportunity to provide feedback on a core part of their teaching, but that it indicated a level of interest from their Department which other students perceived as lacking.

In common with other Divisions students within MPLS stated that they were hoping to gain skills relating to analysis and problem-solving which would assist them in getting a job subsequent to graduation.

What skills students feel that they are developing

The 3 main points which emerged from MPLS focus groups (separately from those points which were universal across Divisions such as students believing Oxford's teaching model led to the development of transferable skills) were:

- Even allowing for students in other Divisions indicating that they have an exceptionally large workload there was a feeling within MPLS that one of the largest skillsets they are developing is the ability to work harder than their peers at other universities. Comments such as "I'm now able to have a brutal work schedule" and "No matter how high-powered a job I get I won't have to work

harder than I do at Oxford” were representative of comments made in focus groups, as was the idea that a central feature of the teaching system was the perseverance which it bred in students.

- In addition to the points which typically emerged in response to this question (transferable skills, ability to speak with more confidence and defend a point of view etc), “communication skills” was cited by consensus in nearly every focus group without prompting. While this skillset was mentioned in focus groups in all other Divisions it was mentioned to an unparalleled degree by those students reading subjects within MPLS.
- Whereas many students in other Divisions noted the potential for the tutorial system to both improve and damage students’ confidence, students in MPLS were more willing to state that their confidence had been damaged by the teaching which they had received. Although students in other Divisions spoke positively about arriving at Oxford and realising that most of their peers were at least as academically qualified as them, students in MPLS were more likely to say that this realisation had damaged their confidence, particularly as it often taken place in tutorials. This emerged in comments such as “my confidence is knocked when you’re put in a small-fish/big-pond scenario” and “it’s hard to stay motivated when your tutor tells you that ‘teaching you is soul-destroying’”. Many students did feel that the teaching they had received had improved their confidence - comments such as “I would never have dreamed of giving a presentation to that many people before” and “debating with tutors opens your mind to new ideas” were also made by multiple students in focus groups. The negative comments made about confidence by students in MPLS were not, however, made in such a sustained fashion by students in other Divisions.

What students feel teaching is not currently providing

Three major points emerged in this area from discussions with students in the MPLS Division. All of these were, to one extent or another, also reflected in discussions with students in other Divisions:

- Research Skills. This was particularly apparent in Mathematics where students complained that it was hard to know whether they would wish to carry on to further study given the lack of knowledge that they have as to how they would most effectively carry out research.
- Presentation Skills. As in other Divisions students believed that presentation skills were important, that it would not be desirable for these to be embedded into tutorials and that class-based teaching provided an opportunity to develop these. A minority of students felt that while presentation skills were important they should not be formally taught at university. On balance, however, students argued that presentation skills were important in future careers and could also play a valuable role in academia. Presentation skills were also seen as an example of the desirability of group-based work more generally. Although this was mentioned more frequently by students in other Divisions, students in MPLS still felt that working in groups would be useful and is not currently possible within many courses.
- Study Skills & Workload. As has been stated elsewhere, students frequently expressed disappointment at the fact that their workload is such that they do not have the time to work outside of the parameters of their course. Students spoke of “sacrificing understanding” as a result of pressure to submit essays and other work on a weekly basis, with a different focus group reporting that the workload is such that it makes it difficult “to understand the subject properly”. Students also reported that they found it strange that there was no scheduled revision on

examination technique, particularly given the comparative lack of correlation between tutorial styles of work and methods of assessment.

Examinations & Assessment

With a few exceptions, students within MPLS were more satisfied than their peers in other Divisions with the alignment between the teaching model and the manner in which they were examined. Where dissatisfaction did exist it related to specific problems relating to specific areas of the syllabus not being tested through timed examinations but rather through other means. It is possible that this issue was raised less frequently than in Humanities and Social Sciences as a result of the continuous pattern of assessment which exists within many subjects located within MPLS. The annual nature of examinations in subjects such as Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics offers the opportunity for students to better understand the relationship between their tutorial work and their examinations if for no other reason than the fact that examinations will - by default - be pressing for many students within the Division. Points which were frequently raised in focus groups for students within MPLS include:

- Mark schemes and model answers. It was frequently observed that students were dissatisfied with the mark schemes with which they were presented. Focus groups frequently explicitly said (without prompting) that model answers would help students develop their understanding of what examiners were looking for in terms of what constituted a 1st class answer as opposed to a high 2:1 class answer. Many students reported that it was harder for them to access information on past papers and examiners' reports than their peers doing other subjects - this argument was not mirrored by students in other Divisions (who also did not make such frequent references to specific ideas of improved information for students).
- A broad sense that students understood the skillset which examiners were looking for even if implementing this set of skills was challenging. Nearly all focus groups stated that coping with stress, being proactive in tracking down past papers and course handbooks and having a good memory for facts were important prerequisites for doing well in examinations. While students were less certain about their ability to do well in examinations, there was an understanding which was more pronounced than in other Divisions as to what sort of techniques would help in improving academic performance in exams.
- Collections were seen as being of mixed use in preparing for exams. Students who believed that they had a value frequently argued that they should be taken more seriously in colleges, in order to provide a sense that they were important and to simulate more realistically an examination environment. Students contrasted the significance of university examinations against the comparatively low weight attached to collections by many colleges and saw a role for collections to be taken more seriously both by students and colleges.

Specific methods of teaching.

Lectures: There was more discussion on lectures in MPLS focus groups than in other Divisions, possibly as a consequence of the increased number of lectures which students in Mathematics & Sciences typically attend. The substantive points raised were, however, largely the same as those in

other Divisions - students felt strongly that lectures were most valuable when lecturers had a clear theme to their lecture and had prepared it in advance. Feedback on lecturers was typically more positive within MPLS than in the other three Divisions, with students having stronger feelings as to what constituted both good and bad practice in delivering lectures. Examples of good practice included lecturers stating objectives for the lecture prior to commencing it and continually relating theoretical points to their practical implications. It was felt that this enabled an improved learning environment with points being made by lecturers being easier to follow than if lectures were either excessively theoretical or practical. The single largest distinction between respondents in MPLS and respondents in other Divisions was that students in MPLS expressed strong preferences for lectures to contain breaks in the middle and to be more effectively timetabled. This again seems likely to be a function of the increased number of lectures which students in MPLS attend, with students feeling that while lectures are valuable they could be improved by running concurrently with tutorials. The point relating to breaks in lectures stemmed from a sense that having multiple lectures running consecutively - while possibly necessary for timetabling reasons - made it hard for students to maintain focus on their work.

Tutorials: Students in MPLS typically had different views as to what the core components of a good tutorial were compared with students in other Divisions. Whereas students in Humanities and Social Sciences made frequent references to the important role that tutorial partners played in determining whether tutorials were 'good' or 'bad', the focus of students in MPLS was far more on tutors themselves. A focus was placed specifically on preparation for tutorials and the environment which a tutor created within the tutorial. Key points made repeatedly were:

- Tutors planning tutorials noticeably contributed to whether tutorials were good or bad. It was felt that tutors who failed to plan tutorials frequently made the tutorial less useful than it could otherwise be, with poor tutors being prepared to conduct needlessly long tutorials regardless of whether substantial learning was being accomplished. Preparation could contribute to tutorials when tutors had taken the time to identify from pre-submitted work what students had found difficult, with the tutorial itself being centred around these areas. It was thought that while students should guide tutorials, this should primarily be done through tutors recognising which areas could most usefully be covered in a tutorial. Preparation was thought to work both ways, with many students commenting that it was particularly frustrating to have to do questions in tutorials with little to no chance to prepare in advance. This was felt to be irritating as it ignored the potential for more significant interaction between students and tutors which could take place in tutorials.
- Students within MPLS seemed broadly more content with slightly larger numbers of tutorial partners than were students in other Divisions. Whereas students in Humanities & Social Sciences typically indicated that two or three students in a tutorial was ideal (with larger numbers leading to discontent over reduced contact time), students in MPLS more regularly commented that four students in a tutorial would be acceptable. Although opinions on this point varied the trend was still noticeable.
- Compared with other Divisions, fewer points were made directly about feedback. It was not clear whether this because students within MPLS were comparatively more satisfied with the quantity and quality of feedback with which they were provided. A very large proportion of students did, however, indicate their view that handing in work prior to tutorials greatly contributed to the quality

of the tutorial itself. It was thought that this allowed tutors to consider weaknesses in students' work before the tutorial discussion (even if no mark was given on the work). The high levels of satisfaction among students in MPLS with this technique suggests that it should be considered as an option to be encouraged across other Divisions, particularly in the context of improving student satisfaction with feedback on work.

Classes: Compared with other Divisions students in MPLS frequently had a less developed understanding of how classes could differ from tutorials. This was in part a consequence of students in many focus groups reporting that they rarely had classes, with those who had classes feeling generally that they were "really just larger versions of tutorials". This is at odds with the perceived interrelationship between tutorials and classes which emerged in focus groups for other Divisions, with students in those feeling that tutorials and classes offered the opportunity for students to develop complementary skill sets. The other main points which stood out in this discussion (to an extent which was not true for other Divisions) were:

- That postgraduates were better at delivering classes than established academics. While students in other Divisions typically made this point, there was not a great deal of consensus around it. In MPLS, by contrast, students typically felt this to be the case, with students often linking this to the perceived approachability of postgraduate students as opposed to research-active academics.
- Interlinked with the above point was the comparatively high frequency of students who reported that they did not feel comfortable talking in large intercollegiate classes. This, again, was not replicated in focus groups in other Divisions (where students were more likely to express frustration with students who did not actively participate in class-based teaching).

Lab Work: The core point which emerged in discussions over what constituted good laboratory-based work was that students were looking for opportunities which interlinked with other forms of teaching. This manifested itself through comments relating to a clear explanation of the purpose behind each lab session at the start and students expressing frustration that labs were occasionally not scheduled concurrently with other forms of teaching, making it hard to fully appreciate why experiments were being undertaken. Students became frustrated in discussion on this question to an extent which was not matched by any other discussion within MPLS. Problems raised with lab work included:

- In clarity over the objectives behind lab work, including a sense that it was only taking place because it had historically taken place. Students frequently expressed sentiments such as "we don't learn anything in labs" and "I'm only following instructions without really having any idea what I'm meant to be learning". Concern was expressed that the current system of teaching through lab work was outdated, with longer lab projects being preferable to many short ones as this would more accurately simulate a research environment.
- Frustration over facilities and the quality of equipment which was provided. This was particularly notable for students in Physics and Chemistry, who felt that they often had to work with equipment that made it hard to generate accurate or reliable data.

- As with the discussion on classes it was noticeable that students typically stated that postgraduate students involved in leading/demonstrating lab work were more enthusiastic and better within this specific form of teaching than established academics.

Annexe D: Medical Sciences

Expectations pre-application and how they are being matched.

As with most other Divisions students felt that they had only a basic understanding of Oxford's teaching system prior to applying. Pre-application knowledge of Oxford's teaching system was typically limited to tutorials. However, several students studying Medicine noted that they had applied to Oxford because of the lecture based style of teaching and that they had wanted to avoid problem based courses.

Although people broadly expected 'tutorials' people were uncertain as to what the structure of a 'tutorial' was aside from it was done in a small group. A few students mentioned that they expected to be taught one on one although there was little disquiet that students rarely had singleton tutorials. It was frequently felt that people had applied to Oxford on reputational grounds, because it was "the best", but as in other Divisions there was recognition that in part Oxford's reputation was interlinked with the tutorial system. Little else was put forward for an alternative reason for applying although several students stated that they applied "because I could".

While the general consensus was that the teaching was generally of a high standard and had matched expectations. It was noted on several occasions that as the student held few expectations it was then a moot point to ask whether they had been met; despite this claim it seems as though most students hold subconscious expectations which had typically been matched

Expectations which students held that have been matched:

- Tutorial System. The structure of the tutorial system had been generally been what they expected: intensive and small group teaching. However, there were issues surrounding disparity between colleges in provision and quality assurance discussed below.
- Level of work. Many students mentioned that they believed Oxford's system of teaching would present them with a substantial and challenging workload. Although students mentioned how heavy the workload was it was often said that the system of teaching supported them effectively.

Expectations they held which had not been matched:

- Size of tutorials. Tutorials are often larger than students expected and several students noted that one on one tutorials are almost non-existent. This was not universally seen a negative outcome for the reasons outlined in other Divisions - students feel that tutorials containing two or three students allow for a more iterative learning process and a greater level of discussion than might otherwise take place.

Practice that has been in contrast to what they thought teaching at Oxford would be:

- Consistency and lack of framework for teaching- this point is concerned with the lack of consistently excellent teaching and the perceived lack of a common framework for teaching. While no student highlighted either of these issues as an expectation they held before they arrived, many felt that it would be a matter of course at a world-class institution such as Oxford. While it is clear that there will always be a degree of variation between the quality of the teaching provided from academic to academic, not least because of the legitimate role for academic judgement, students voiced that

there was an unacceptable level of variation. Partly because it was unexpected, and partly because the inconsistency led to students occasionally receiving what they felt to be substandard teaching, we believe that it should be noted as cause for concern. While one of the great strengths of the Oxford model is the level of contact students have with academics, significant variation between tutors can have a markedly adverse effect on student's educational outcomes. Concern over consistency was not something that was particular to Medical Sciences however it was consistently raised in the focus groups that were held. One substantive point was raised which was not present in the other Divisions was that tutorials were occasionally rehashed lectures where there was little interaction between the students and the academic. Students also expressed surprise that there seemed to be no common framework for teaching, especially with regard to tutorials. Although students appreciated that academics approached tutorial teaching in a different way they were surprised that there seemed to be no standards regarding when work was handed in or returned, how significant the essay was to the tutorial and the base of knowledge their tutors' had on certain topics.

- Disparity between colleges. This was primarily focused on the provision of teaching. Medics in some colleges mentioned that they received far more tutorials than they imagined and medics in other colleges highlighted the disparity between numbers of tutorials that students get. The number of tutorials which students were getting appeared to range from 2 per fortnight to 8 per fortnight depending on what college they attended (out of the 10 in which we held focus groups). Students did not merely note this variation but were concerned about the possibility that attendance at different colleges could lead to very real differences in the quantity of teaching which students enjoyed.

The final question which focused on expectations asked students to consider what they hoped to gain from their Oxford before they came up. As with other Divisions there was frequently a pause after this question. Based on the consistency with which this took place across Divisions we took this in part to mean that students were often uncertain about what they hoped to gain, largely because they had not conceived of their Oxford experience in those terms before they arrived. More often than not the first response offered was 'a degree?'. Employment prospects were mentioned slightly more in Medical Sciences than in other Divisions but this could be because degrees in this Division have a clearer career progression than in other Divisions. Many students were also hoping to get a deep understanding of science and to be intellectually stretched and challenged in a way they might not be at other institutions. Several medics highlighted that they hoped to gain a theoretical and science based understanding of medicine which they might not have gained at other institutions; for some this was a key reason for applying and something they were very much hoping to gain.

What skills students feel they are developing.

As with focus groups given in other Divisions students quickly offered examples of what they were gaining and what skills they were developing as a result of the teaching. Perhaps surprisingly students did not mention skills that were raised in other focus groups: analytical thinking, thinking on your feet, ability to function without sleep, time management and academic confidence. However, some Medical Science students mentioned that they were developing essay-writing skills that they were not expecting to gain from a Medical Science degree. There was also a sense that students were gaining a

significant depth of knowledge about their subject with comparisons being made noting that there was more independent and critical thinking than at secondary school.

What students feel teaching is not currently providing.

By virtue of the fact that there were few answers to this question that touched on substantive issues as opposed to more superficial complaints it appears that students in this division are relatively pleased with the teaching they are receiving. This is in contrast with substantive complaints which were raised in focus groups held for other Divisions. The most notable points were the lack of practical skills students felt they were gaining and the concern that although students were gaining a deep understanding of their subject there was little opportunity to cover any topic in depth. These concerns were raised in other Divisions - Humanities students noted that they weren't gaining practical skills as a result of their teaching- and the latter was raised in Humanities and MPLS. The point about practical skills manifested itself in discussions over both Pre-clinical medicine and Experimental Psychology. Although the lack of contact with patients in Pre-clinical medicine was understood at the point of application there was still disappointment that there was no clinical medicine in the first three years of an Oxford medical degree. A notable quote from one focus group on this question was a student commenting that "you learn about the brain from day one, and never SEE them." Medics want a more explicit link to be drawn between their practicals and clinical practice as it makes learning more memorable. There was also a sense that sometimes the chance to study a topic in depth was sacrificed because of the sheer volume of work that was covered. However, it should be borne in mind that students felt as though they were gaining a very in-depth knowledge of their subject as a whole and that this issue was raised less often than in MPLS and Humanities.

Examinations & Assessment.

We noticed a significant difference in this area than in other Divisions. Students were much more satisfied with exams and how methods of assessment aligned with the teaching which they received. Although students expressed a view that both factual knowledge and stylistic excellence would be necessary in order for them to achieve top marks, they were more certain of how they could achieve this than were students in other Divisions. The disparity between teaching and assessment was brought up less frequently than the regular mentions that this issue received in other Divisions although it was mentioned in one focus group. Students felt that achieving high marks required lots of detailed information to be provided through essays, with there being less of a role for flair than in other subjects. Compared with other Divisions there was much less discussion of student confidence in this section, with more of a focus being placed on fact-based learning rather than uncertainty over how best to produce essays which stood out for reasons of style. It was also felt that detailed mark schemes and syllabi were a positive feature of the course. Students thought that tutors frequently wanted varying styles of essays with this being confusing on the grounds that students believed there to be a certain definitive standard as to what constituted a "good essay and a bad essay". To a limited extent students noted that because they had not had to write essays for Science A-Levels some would have liked a bit more support over how to construct an exam essay but the general consensus was that students knew what was required for an essay which would achieve 8/8. Such a result would be heavily dependent on knowing the material in great depth and being able to deftly employ it. However it was noted that knowing the material was not enough to get a first class degree at finals.

Specific methods of teaching.

Lectures: This question was one which gained the greatest number of responses, however many replies were descriptive rather than analytical or critical. There seemed to be a more positive response to lectures than in other Divisions, which suggested that Medical Sciences students felt as though the lectures they were receiving were typically of a high quality. Students broadly agreed with those in other Divisions as to what made a good lecture, suggesting that Medical Sciences may provide a model to other Divisions as to how lectures could best be delivered.

The most important ingredient was that lectures were engaging; students felt that in the absence of this characteristic little could be gained from the lecture. Lectures which engaged students were those which got students to think instead of just informing them. Students liked lectures that reflected the rigid course structure, particularly in terms of the lecture being in alignment with the goals of the syllabus (both in terms of lectures being timed effectively relative to other areas of the syllabus, and in terms of similar information being communicated through lectures and other modes of teaching). A great lecture was felt to be one that engaged students while furnishing them with the necessary knowledge on the topic in question. It was felt that a great lecture would also highlight interesting factors behind or aspects of the relevant section of the syllabus which students may not have discovered for themselves. As with other Divisions it was notable that lectures were so dependent on the individual presentation skills of tutors. Examples of good practice in terms of presentation included students who broke for a few minutes in the middle of a lecture to allow students to make notes and discuss the lecture among themselves. By contrast, an hour long lecture featuring a lecturer reading notes from a Powerpoint presentation represented an example of the sort of lecture which was felt to be less useful as it offered a wealth of information which could not be easily absorbed.

Tutorials: From the responses to the above questions it was clear that students highly valued the tutorial system and were broadly satisfied by what they received. Responses rotated around three main themes: the impact of the tutor giving the tutorial, the style of tutorial teaching and feedback. Responses indicated that students feel the style of tutorial teaching is unavoidably interlinked with the tutor delivering the teaching.

Many students said a bad tutorial was one in which they felt that the tutor had failed to keep "their side of the agreement", for example through failing to read essays prior to tutorials (if they had been asked for in advance) or through having failed to plan the tutorial. More so than in any other Division, students in Medical Sciences complained that their tutors occasionally did not have sufficient knowledge, either of the subject or the syllabus, to teach undergraduates effectively. Many students, without prompting from anyone involved in leading the focus groups, stated that they believed greater training for tutors should take place to improve the quality of teaching delivered to undergraduates.

Students noted the importance of the tutor involving all students in the tutorial. In some cases this would involve tutors ensuring that everyone had a basic comprehension of a topic before moving the tutorial on to a more complex issues. This way all students would be able to take part even if they had not been able to understand the topic. Students had a preference for tutors who required them to debate and present an argument and then be prepared to defend it. An example of good practice in this area emerging from one focus group relates to a Part II option in which the tutor made their students critically review a journal instead of writing an essay. Students highlighted the extent to which they enjoyed this approach to teaching, feeling that it gave them an improved understanding of how

best to approach more complex topics as a result of the critical engagement with academic work which may otherwise have been lacking had they simply had to write an essay on the topic. There was a large degree of consensus that when tutorials strayed off topic they were frustrating because they were not useful. This, in part, appears to be a consequence of the extent to which undergraduate medics were familiar with their course syllabus in a way which students within other Divisions are not.

Students also repeatedly emphasised the value of receiving good feedback and felt that the tutorial was the most appropriate venue in which they could gain a sense of how they were performing. Good feedback was that which enabled students to understand how to get the best marks both in tutorial essays and in exams. It appears that practice differs across faculties on how feedback is given with medics receiving marks on their work more frequently than other students within the Division. Medics typically appreciated having their work marked and saw such feedback as essential in assisting them to being able to accurately assess how they were progressing academically. It was felt that marks enabled students to track their development over the course of a paper but that marks were not - in and of themselves - the most important factor which students took into account when reviewing their feedback more generally.

Classes: Comparatively few students had classes but those who did were clear that interactivity was the key to a good class. Students felt classes were most effective when students were able to engage and learn actively, with 'passive learning' being seen as particularly unsuitable for a class-based learning environment. Tasks needed to be given beforehand, such as creating a presentation or completing a problem sheet, to ensure that the class was useful. There was a general feeling that too many students in a class had a detrimental impact on its success for the reasons outlined in earlier Annexes.

Labwork: As in MPLS we found that students were not always satisfied with labwork. This owed in large part to what was perceived as poor organisation. Many students highlighted the large amount of time which they are required to spend in the labs and felt that much of this was excessive. It was often felt that the same knowledge and understanding could be gained in a much shorter period of time, with this particularly being the case among 1st year undergraduates. There were differing ideas over the role of demonstrators with fewer students than was the case in MPLS stating that they felt their lab sessions to be poorly supervised.

There was also debate over how much lab work contributed to overall knowledge and understanding of the subject being studied. From the focus groups it appeared as though students understood that practicals were supposed to enhance their knowledge and understanding but often felt that they failed to do so in a significant way. Often students did not know the relevance of the practical work that they were doing and it was raised several times that students could get through a whole lab session by just following instructions without understanding the scientific rationale behind the practical which they were doing. It was thought that practicals increased in importance as the degree progressed but that certain sessions which students spent large quantities of time in were not academically necessary compared with possible alternatives.

Annexe E: Questions asked in focus groups (prompts were used if necessary to stimulate discussion)

1. What did you know about Oxford's system of teaching before you applied to Oxford?
2. How much did the system of teaching impact on your decision to apply?
3. If you held expectations of the teaching before you came up in what ways have these been matched by the teaching?
4. Before you arrived what were you hoping to gain from your Oxford education (prompts - skills, knowledge, breadth of experience)?
5. What skills do you feel that you are developing as a result of the teaching at Oxford?
6. Thinking about what you wish to gain by the time you leave Oxford is there anything that current teaching isn't providing?
7. What skills do you believe that you need to succeed in examinations at Oxford?
8. Describe a good lecture (prompts - engaging, audible, interactive, number of people, convenient location)
9. Describe a good tutorial (prompts - passion of tutor, research-active tutor, number of tutorial partners, passion of tutorial partners, mix of written/verbal feedback)
10. Describe a bad tutorial (prompts - seemingly disinterested tutor, number of tutorial partners, lack of feedback, confrontational environment)
11. Describe a good class (prompts - good discussions, sharing of ideas, interactive environment, led by students or tutor)
12. What makes a good lab session? (MPLS & Medical Sciences only)