

A Student's Eye View of Higher Education in Large Classes

For any further information please contact:

Shaun Patrick Keegan: 0404832k@student.gla.ac.uk

Graeme Stewart MacLeod: 0404714m@student.gla.ac.uk

The level one Biology course is the largest of its kind in Western Europe (this year an expected intake of 750 students). It comprises of two modules (one per semester), consisting of lectures, weekly laboratories, several tutorials and a problem based learning (PBL) component.

1. The first day of lectures is a very daunting time and in Glasgow University's case possibly more so as there is an intake of 50% of students who live in or around Glasgow (i.e. not going to student residence).
2. The social aspect of the year is nurtured in laboratories where students are seated according to a pre-made seating plan. This disposes of the "should I sit next to them" issue and forces students to interact. It also means students are exposed to the same core group on a weekly basis and allows friendships to form.
3. The laboratories are further supported by consistency in the demonstrators. There is one allocated to each bench. Having the same demonstrator provides a familiar face that students feel comfortable approaching.
4. The PBL component is an enjoyable way to learn. It also provides the situation where students must interact out with lab and lecture classes and thus allows for friendships to form. Since our time the PBL has been moved from semester two to semester one. This provides this social activity early on so students can get to know each other from the start.
5. Level one assessment is very well handled and provides a broad range of assessment methods. This is suited to students as the broad range allows those, for example, not great at essays to excel in other forms of assessment.

The level two Biology course varies greatly from the level one course. Still having an excess of 500+ students, the course moves from two centrally taught modules spanning a year, to 12 independently organised modules. These 12 are chosen from an choice of 28. These modules vary in size, from 40 to 400 students. A variety of combinations is required for entry into the third year. The reason behind the vastness of the module system is to provide students with a maximum range of choice of what degree course they would like to pursue.

1. The social situation is more strained in second year. As everyone has a variety of different classes it "breaks" the bonds made in the level one course as students are potentially forced into several different class groups every day.
2. These different groups however provide a wider choice as at this

point as depending on the modules chosen a student can have several final degree options. For instance, one ten credit module allowed entry to the Immunology honours degree, and 12 ten credit modules were able to be chosen.

3. As the modules were only ten credits however, there was a limitation to the forms of assessment that could be justifiably given. Many courses resorted to multiple choice examinations and this limits preparation for later years when essay style examinations are the core form of assessment.
4. The timetable for the year was also sporadic and encouraged non-attendance. A student could have a 9 am class and no other timetabled events for the day. Alternatively a student could have a 9-5 day with no break in between. As there are so many modules poor timetables could not be avoided.

Progression to level three sees students taught in a small-scale version of the level one course. It is a core group (in the case of our course of approximately 70 people) taught in a centralised system as in level one. Assessment is again varied, with a focus on essay style answers. There are weekly labs spanning two days as well as lectures. There are tutorials spread throughout the year along with PBL sessions. There is also a field course at the start of the year.

1. The social aspect in this year was very prominent. The field course allowed bonding between students. The labs and tutorials provided a core group in which students could develop friendships.
2. The class size was optimal. It was large enough to allow a dilute and diverse social spectrum however not so large that it appeared daunting.
3. PBL again provided a method of study and socialising outside of lectures and labs.
4. Assessment was throughout the year and varied from presentations to essays to lab reports.

Level four consists of four modules, a research project and a dissertation essay. As we are embarking on this year it would not be fair to comment, however based on the outlook, even though it is modular like the level 2 course, it is more organised and as the modules do not overlap, we feel that the year will progress more smoothly.

Overall, we feel that it is not the size that is important in determining whether the course is taught well or how students experience their education. It is in fact (in our opinion) the method of delivery of the course. Comparing our three years, the first and the third year were different in size by ten fold, yet both experiences were largely positive, where as the second year, the size of the class wasn't the limitation, more so how the course was delivered that limited the experience.