

Larger modules: Space for deeper learning in History

Overview

Module/Programme/Stage Coordinator: Assoc. Prof. Paul Rouse

Module/Programme Title: All 3rd Year UCD History Option Modules

Student Cohort: All UCD BA Undergraduate Level Three students of History. Joint Major students must take two Ten Credit Modules at Level Three – one in each semester.

The Background

For several years before 2013, the UCD School of History wished to enhance the learning experience of their students, including student work-load, as students in their second and third years were typically taking six **five credit** modules of history per semester, the University's typical module size. In response to this, at Level Three for the 2013-2014 academic year, the School sought and were given derogations to run **ten credit** modules, initially on a two-year basis. These derogations have been extended every year since then and **ten credit** modules are now a fundamental part of the History curriculum.

Under the Academic Regulations 2019-2020, the relevant section reads: "*Modules (excluding research and dissertation modules) may be delivered in sizes of 5, 7.5, 10, or 15 credits*" (UCD. 2018. p50). This regulation allows Schools move away from **five credit** modules within their curriculum, with the agreement of their Programme Board, where necessary.

This case study highlights the results of this change in the School of History, for those considering this move. The shift requires careful attention to be given to workload, to learning outcomes and to assessment (among other things), all of which require differentiation from **five credit** modules.



What we aimed to do

The essential ambition of the introduction of **ten credit** modules was to allow students pursue a deeper engagement with particular aspects of History at Level 3. More particularly, what the School of History had been seeking to achieve was to:

- provide more small-group teaching and learning to every student who studies History to degree level;
- encourage more research-led learning, by allowing students the time and opportunity to design their own research projects and to engage in their own research through primary sources;
- foster deeper identification with the School of History;
- facilitate the achievement of key University, Programme, and School teaching goals;
- reduce student workload;
- improve the quality of the degree awarded to students of history

In this instance, we believed that common intended learning outcomes in history (to understand the historiography, to present an argument based on understanding of primary sources, to identify bias in historical argument, to analyse key historical problems and questions using a variety of sources), as well as other transferable skills (to give oral presentations, to manage a research project, to work in a team) were more easily achieved through **ten credit** modules than the previously existing range of **five credit** modules. Crucially, the **ten credit** modules were intended to allow for the introduction of assessments that allowed students time and space for critical thinking, building on the knowledge and skills acquired at Levels Two and Three. This approach aligns with the new UCD programme assessment and feedback principle of developing some 'space', i.e. *Consideration is given to the time and space for assessment and feedback approaches, including staff and student assessment load, timely feed-forward, space for more complex learning*' (UCD T&L, 2018a, 2018b).

How we did it

All of the modules were introduced at Level Three. To meet the basic requirement of 25 credits in History for a joint major degree, students are required to take one **five credit** module as a core historiography module, while also choosing two **ten credit** modules from the options available. That is to say that History students can pick two **ten credit** modules from a list of some 20 **ten credit** modules offered in each semester.

Under that basic structure, the following framework was put in place:

1. Each module was limited to 17 students.
2. Each module ran one one-hour lecture and one two-hour seminar each week.
3. Each module was assessed by participation, by coursework and by an end of semester research assessment. Students receive more detailed feedback on their coursework and participation. The School of History spent a lot of time on assessment and on ensuring a consistency across all modules in how students were assessed.

When the **ten credit** modules were being introduced, the School worked with the Staff-Student Committee and ran a series of workshops and webinars, produced an information leaflet which was distributed to every student of History. This information campaign was designed to ensure all students understood the rationale and operation of the new curriculum.

Probably the biggest difficulty we faced – initially – was in connection with finding a two-hour slot on the timetable and securing rooms across the two-hour slot, when existing practice was rooted in one-hour slots.

How it went

One of the conditions of the derogation that was granted for the introduction of **ten credit** modules in the first instance was that an independent review be conducted into their operation after two years (Guerin, 2015). This was organised by the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and undertaken by Dr. Suzanne Guerin comprised of specifically tailored questions set into Student Feedback Forms, interviews with students, interviews with staff and written feedback from staff. The report, in essence, offered unequivocal endorsement of the **ten credit** modules. It showed how student attendance was up, student engagement was higher, module satisfaction was higher and grades were higher. As the report noted, *'... the ratings for the **ten credit** modules were significantly higher than the ratings for the **five credit** modules. Reviewing the scores for the two sets of modules it is apparent that the average score for the **ten credit** modules was at least a half a point higher than the five credit modules...(Guerin, 2015)'*

A survey of students brought up recurrent themes, notably in respect of the depth of the modules on offer and the manner in which they created time for students to develop. A representative comment from one student noted, *"They were more interesting as there was time to go into more detail on topics and they are less stressful than 5 credit modules which had too big of a workload put together."* This issue of workload was repeatedly reference in comments: *"[It] meant I had one less module which gave me a smaller timetable and allowed for easier study and you could cope with the workload that was slightly more than a 5 credit module"*. There was also a related sense that students engaged more thoroughly: *"You put more time into it. You definitely do all the readings and actually take in what you're studying!"* (Guerin, 2015).

In addition, from the interviews with staff, there was a sense that the introduction of these modules was a support with the ongoing challenge of over-assessment (Guerin, 2016) These findings are echoed in a national report (National Forum, 2017) which identified that **five credit** modules have a similar number of assessments as **ten credit** modules, despite being half the student effort hours.

Some tips for a School/Subject or Programme team considering this approach:

- Be clear why you are introducing **ten credit** modules;
- Develop the proposal with full consultation within the relevant unit;
- Draw on student feedback in developing the new modules;
- Ensure that all relevant aspects of the process are communicated to all staff and students;
- Run workshops on learning outcomes and assessment;
- Hold annual reviews.

Resources

Guerin, S (2015) *Report on the Delivery of 10 Credit Option Modules in UCD School of History*. UCD Unpublished Report: Dublin.

National Forum (2017) [*Profile of Assessment Practices in Irish Higher Education*](#), accessed 5th Dec 2018

UCD T&L (2018a) [*UCD Programme Assessment and Feedback Principles*](#), UCD T&L: Dublin

UCD T&L (2018b) [*Some Initial Ideas for Programme Assessment & Feedback Enhancement*](#), UCD T&L: Dublin

UCD (2018) *UCD Academic Regulations 2019-2020*. UCD: Dublin