Course report BL7028 HT20 SESCA 15 hp

Course coordinator

Sarah Cornell

Number of students taking exam/other relevant examination form

26

Number of students passed

26

Description of any changes since the last time the course was given

The Covid pandemic restrictions affected every aspect of course delivery. Most lectures were adapted or pre-recorded for online presentation. On-site teaching and group work classes were adapted for small-group socially-distanced activities. Some adaptations had to be made at short notice (eg., when national guidance changed, or when people had to self-isolate because of potential exposure).

No major changes were made to the course itself. As in previous years, the Module 1 group task was aligned with a contemporary global sustainability policy issue. More emphasis was a placed on collective critical discussion of texts in Module 2 (rather than individual readings). The Module 2 assessed seminar was adapted for mixed mode (online /on-site) delivery, and so had fewer observers (audience) than usual. Module 3 has a new co-leader, to enable a smooth transition when the longest serving co-leader steps down from the role.

All course materials were provided through Athena, as well as most assignments and feedback.

Postitive things about the course according to students (summary based on both quantitative date from evaluation and the students' text answers)

The whole course is intellectually challenging and brings fresh perspectives on a wide range of sustainability issues.

Students liked the range of lecturers and the overall quality of the lecturing. Prerecorded lectures were also a positive feature.

The introductions to social-ecological systems fieldwork and analysis methods were appreciated, especially when these involve new perspectives, skills and approaches.

Things about the course that could be improved according to students (summary based on both quantitative date from evaluation and the students' text answers)

Many students find the reading list to be long and difficult to get through. Others ask for more discussion of the readings (and make suggestions for additional texts).

Much of the teaching relies on group working and discussion, which does not suit all students equally well.

The scheduling of days was often problematic. Fitting teaching into times after and before rush-hour (to minimise covid risks) makes the work day too short, but condensing activities into on-site days may extend the work day too much.

A significant number of students found the pace and workload quite high.

Teachers' analysis of the course

The students were consistently positive and supportive despite the exceptional circumstances of the year. They were tolerant of the many technical challenges encountered with the shift to online and mixed-mode teaching and learning, and respected the need to comply with various restrictions in the building and teaching environment. They rapidly became the in-house experts in mixed-mode meeting facilitation, IT and comms. The whole teaching team feels grateful!

Despite the covid restrictions, the quality of class interactions and also of student/teaching team interaction has been very good. In class, the teaching experience felt very normal most of the time.

Some aspects of teaching have arguably benefited from the 'nudge' to new modes of engagement and knowledge sharing. Athena works well, when we use it well. Advance preparation of materials (recorded lectures) allows for more interactive contact sessions. Small-group online activities also seem very fruitful.

Students often comment on the pace and workload in Course 1, but then become familiar with expectations and establish routines for later courses which are objectively even faster and harder. Many students' comments indicate that they know the time they devote to the course is self-imposed. This year, the proportion of students raising this as a concern is perhaps higher than usual, so it is a concern for us in the teaching team too.

Conclusions and suggestions for changes (if any)

Group working and discussion are fundamentally important aspects of transdisciplinary sustainability science, which is why so much emphasis is placed on learning in this way in the first course of the SERSD Masters. However, the splitting of our teaching into different groups and modes (because of Covid) shows more starkly than ever before that some students find this much more challenging than others. It is also much more difficult for the lecturer to detect and respond to these interpersonal issues in online / mixed mode teaching. Student suggestions and feedback indicate good ways to manage this in future: provide explanations and dialogue 'toolkits' in the intro week; ensure that there are regular scheduled reflection times (the Monday afternoon 'how to be a researcher' sessions); structure discussions in different ways to suit different contributions, etc.

If this mixed-mode situation continues for the longer term – and some aspects surely will – the teaching team needs to ensure that expectations of workload are very clear. We try to do this every year, because (a) the students are always highly motivated and (b) studies on a research-oriented masters program are very different from bachelor-level taught courses. For example, having a rich resource of online materials (prerecorded lectures, etc) means that some students prepare much more in advance for classes than they would otherwise have been able to – and then gather more new material in the scheduled class time. As long as that is a positive learning experience, that is fine, but it is not sustainable if it becomes a doubled effort.

We will continue to explore the functionality of Athena and develop future teaching and assessment materials accordingly. A foundational session in using the online environment would be useful. Even people who have used similar platforms before benefit from a refresher.