

Faculty Survey 2008
Report by the Standing Committee on Teaching and Examining
17 June 2008

In the Lent Term of 2008 the Faculty of MML conducted an online survey of 736 undergraduates taking the MML and Linguistics Triposes. 375 responses were received. Though the Ostrakon Online Evaluation System employed for this purpose provided percentages rather than raw numbers for most questions and did not distinguish between departments within MML, nonetheless some clear patterns emerged which are reported on here. It may be worth noting that these patterns are more or less the same as those identified in the 2004 survey.

Notes:

- *Survey questions generally asked for responses on an integer scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the negative extreme and 5 the positive extreme. Consequently, the 4.03 rating for Part IA students for departmental information sessions in 1.1 below, for example, should be interpreted as being quite close to 5 “very useful”, the opposite extreme in this case being 1 “not useful”.*
- *Ratings provided below are for Part IA unless otherwise specified. We have done this because (i) IA figures are normally representative of those for the other 3 years, (ii) providing individual figures for all four years for every point was too unsightly, (iii) it was not possible to tally the figures over all four years since raw numbers were not provided by the survey software.*

1. MML Tripos

368 of 728 students in the MML Tripos (51%) responded to the survey, of whom 270 were female (73%) and 100 male. [N.B. we report here the numbers provided by the survey software, even though the total number by gender (370) does not match the total number reported independently of gender (368).]

1.1. Provision of information

Students seeking to obtain information about the Tripos, courses, reading lists, exams, and so on found the following resources particularly useful:

- departmental information sessions (mean 4.03 for Part IA students, 3.53 IB, 3.66 YA, 4.00 II)
- their Director of Studies (3.97)
- the Faculty website (3.95)

They were on the whole quite satisfied (4.27) with the opportunities they were offered to provide feedback to Departments/Sections and the Faculty, though several requested better response to this feedback (indication of what comments were made and how the Faculty intended to respond to them) and others desired the option in the survey to comment on specific lectures and supervisions.

Several students regretted that their departmental information sessions focused on course content at the expense of numbers of students taking the course and numbers of lectures/supervisions, and workload. Others stated the opposite, leaving one wondering whether the culprit is cross-departmental variation or diversity of student perspective.

1.2. Workload and timetable

The lion's share of respondents (73%) considered their workload to be heavy but manageable, with most of the remainder (17%) finding it moderate.

A worrisome portion (24%) experienced problems with the timetabling of Faculty lectures and classes (particularly with respect to Education and Classics), though only 5% of respondents felt that these problems prevented them from taking papers they would otherwise have chosen.

1.3. Facilities

Students appear happy with the Faculty Library, generally visiting it at least once a week (54%) to prepare work for classes and supervisions (46%). A significant majority (65%) use the library on evenings and weekends. Many students expressed a desire for more copies of essential books to be available, and on more than overnight loan.

The CALL facility and Language Centre go largely unnoticed, being used less than once a week by 83% and 95% of students respectively. Associated student comments suggest that the location of the Language Centre and the lack of special resources in CALL (“I’m not entirely sure what they offer that I don’t have on my laptop”) are at least partially responsible for this. Several students were frustrated by long-standing problems with the TUCO software in the CALL facility (The secretary reports that she was advised that TUCO is an old grammar programme, and that students of German are advised to use it for very specific grammar pattern drill exercises only, and that for this purpose it works fine).

1.4. Examinations and assessment

Students found the guidelines for essay portfolios quite clear (3.72).

Several commented that Part II oral language exams were not consistent across the faculty and did not always conform to advertised guidelines. (Note: the Faculty have already addressed this point by implementing recording of Part II orals on a pilot basis from October 2008 (Tripos 2009))

1.5. Year Abroad

Respondents found the guidelines for Year Abroad Projects clear (3.72), though several wished for better guidance with respect to structure and formatting and the Year Abroad Office received only lukewarm reviews (3.13). The majority of students did a dissertation (64%), with the rest doing a translation project (36%). Most were happy with the quality and availability of supervision (4.09 and 4.13 respectively), and found the year abroad beneficial academically (3.89) and personally (4.49).

1.6. Overall balance and summary

Respondents were fairly satisfied with the balance between language and scheduled papers (3.73) and the range of scheduled papers (3.67), though many of the comments associated with this question asked for more non-literary offerings (language, linguistics, history, politics, film). The amount of language teaching provided by the Faculty was considered to be slightly too little (averaging around 2.75 for all four years, with 1.00 being too little, 3.00 just right, and 5.00 too much).

Most students felt that the range of scheduled papers corresponded well to the expectations they had when they arrived in Cambridge, thanks largely to the departmental websites. (Interestingly, the percentage of dissatisfaction on this point increased significantly in higher years of the Tripos.)

1.7. Observations and recommendations

- CALL appears to be under-utilised in the sense that students are generally unaware of its existence and purpose. (It should be noted, though, that according to at least one staff member who uses the facility it is consistently full. Moreover, some or all of the departments in MML already take their new students on a tour of the CALL facility at the beginning of each academic year.) The Faculty, in tandem with the CALL Director, should consider its allocation of resources in this area and/or how it might increase student awareness and use of CALL. Variables to be considered here might include: overlap between resources provided by CALL and the colleges; availability of television programming; selecting a more contemporary name such as “Digital Languages”; providing language resources not available elsewhere.
- The Faculty Library might consider ways in which it would be possible to address student clamour for increased availability of essential readings.
- Students are concerned that their comments and suggestions may not be heeded. We should consider (i) specifying that students get to see this report via the student representatives to the Faculty Board, and (ii) publicising the mechanisms by which their evaluations of individual lecturers and supervisors are taken into account.
- Timetabling conflicts with allied faculties (particularly Education and Classics) appear to be important sources of frustration for MML undergraduates. The Faculty should consider discussing with the relevant authorities in the respective faculties issues such as determining in advance which languages students in Classics and Education intend to pursue. The recent creation of faculty liaisons with AMES and Education should help in this regard.
- The Faculty should consider ways of increasing relevant communication with students before and during their Year Abroad.
- Many students expressed a desire for more papers dealing with language, linguistics, history, politics, and/or film. It might be wise, and salutary for the intellectual robustness of our students, for the language departments to think of ways in which more papers in these areas might be offered.

2. Linguistics Tripos

7 of 8 students in the Linguistics Tripos (88%) responded to the survey, of whom 4 were female (67%) and 2 male, with one student not indicating their gender.

2.1. Provision of information

Students were satisfied with all sources of information save the department handbook. (N.B. the MML departments recently phased out printed handbooks in favour of online content. We therefore suggest that the handbook question in the survey be removed.) They felt there were too few information and feedback sessions.

2.2. Workload and timetable

Most respondents (71%) found their workload to be heavy but manageable. Timetabling was not a significant problem.

2.3. Facilities

Responses mirrored those for MML students, with the exception that linguistics students appear to borrow books from the Faculty Library more frequently. In

addition, the two students who used the Phonetics Lab were very satisfied with it (5.00).

2.4. Overall balance and summary

Respondents could have been more happy with the range of scheduled papers available (3.33), the balance between College and Faculty teaching (3.40), and the balance between Linguistics Department and borrowed papers (3.60). One student regretted that it is not possible to take the most popular Linguistics paper, Li2, in the final year. (We note that this restriction does not hold for students taking the MML tripos.)

2.5. Observations and recommendations

The number of responses was not sufficient for statistically significant trends to emerge, so the generalisations provided above are not necessarily reliable.