

# **C-SAP Project 2002-3**

## **Findings: Sheffield Hallam University and University of Southampton**

### **Project Reference**

19/P/02

### **Project Title**

Enhancing first year politics teaching through an evaluation of the entry level 'political literacy' of undergraduates at a 'new' and an 'old' university.

### **Keywords**

Political literacy; on-line survey; politics, political environment.

### **Summary**

The aim of this project was to determine the levels of political literacy among students entering higher education to study subjects where this is of particular relevance, specifically politics at University of Southampton and political environment at Sheffield Hallam University. For this purpose an on-line instrument was developed and administered. The findings indicated that while there were significant differences in the political literacy of the two groups of students, in both cases the research engendered a 'Hawthorn effect'. If planned with care such projects can effectively prepare the ground for the initial engagement of students with the study of politics.

### **Activities**

For the purposes of this project, known by acronym PLATO (Politics Learning and Teaching On-Line), political literacy was seen as covering both knowledge of the political, economic and social structure and the capacity to understand the meaning and significance of political concepts (Lister 1987; Crick 1998). The impetus for undertaking it came from a variety of sources. First, a number of tutors with responsibility for teaching politics had become increasingly concerned about the 'entry level' or baseline political knowledge of students. Second, contemporary political trends, such as falling electoral turnouts particularly amongst young voters, have caused some to question what might be done to reverse them (Fahmy, 1999; Geddes and Rust, 2000). It is felt that this requires action to promote active citizenship and thereby help revitalise the political life of the country not only at the primary and secondary levels of the education system but also in higher education. Last, there was a desire to continue initial work in the field undertaken at (and funded by) Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in 2001 (Chandler et al. 2002). At the same time, because one of the original project team had moved to the University of Southampton (UoS) there was an opportunity to extend the research and to generate data on which to base some comparative analysis.

In taking the research forward the objectives and associated activities were to:

- redesign the research instrument developed for the pilot;
- administer the instrument at both SHU and UoS and hold follow-up focus groups;
- report the findings;
- consider their implications for teaching, learning and curriculum design;
- identify and learn the lessons from undertaking a project of this kind.

The original research instrument consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions (MCQs). They covered aspects of the:-

- political environment (e.g. Who is the present Home Secretary?);
- economic environment (e.g. What is meant by the phrase 'free market economy'?);
- financial environment (e.g. What is the National Debt?); and
- socio-demographic environment (e.g. Approximately what percentage of the population is of pensionable age?).

The mix reflected the interests of first year tutors responsible for 'environmental' or 'contextual' type units on the programmes within the School of Business and Finance at SHU. Since there were no opportunities for students to take 'pure' politics units, the focus was on current awareness, rather than simply political literacy.

Some of the questions were designed to measure knowledge (e.g. Who is the present Home Secretary?) while others sought to ascertain respondents' understanding of concepts (e.g. What is meant by proportional representation?). Various items of personal data were also collected. These were: course of study; age; gender; UK based or country of origin; type of educational institution attended prior to entering university; A Level subjects; and main method of keeping up to date with current affairs.

In redesigning the instrument for the PLATO project, three broad issues emerged. First, while MCQs elicited factual data easily processed electronically, they did not allow for an exploration of the respondents' depth of understanding. However, the team was constrained by the requirement that, for ease of programming (see below), all questions had to have the same MCQ format (i.e. a choice of one response from 5 options). Moreover, it was not possible to have any 'free text' responses, even where the respondent was able to choose an 'other' option. Despite this constraint, in devising questions an attempt was made to distinguish between those assessing knowledge and those requiring an element of understanding as well as knowledge. A few questions relating to aspects of popular culture (e.g. sport, celebrities, popular music) were also included to provide the basis for comparing political awareness against general awareness. Draft questions were submitted by members of the project team from each university and from these 25 were selected for inclusion in the instrument.

A second issue concerned the feeling that the instrument needed to be sufficiently robust to enable the research to be replicated over time. This meant designing it in such a way that questions could be changed each year while retaining the ability to secure an element of comparability in the results.

A third issue related to the desirability of expanding the instrument to include questions designed to capture data on the opinions of respondents and their degree of engagement with the political system and to find out more about backgrounds and lifestyles. In generating ideas for opinion type questions use was made of the questionnaire developed for the European Social Survey (2002). With respect to personal data, in the light of results from the pilot (Chandler et al, 2002), it was decided to collect more detailed information on A Levels, television viewing habits and parental occupation and interest in politics. Notwithstanding the ease of collecting such data using an MCQ format, concern was expressed over the overall length of the instrument. Ultimately, this was a compromise between the desire to include a wider range of question types and the need to avoid the number of questions being a deterrent to completion.

The resulting instrument was in three parts:

- Part A comprised 25 factual questions covering aspects of politics and popular culture;
- Part B was made up of 10 opinion type questions relating to a variety of socio-political issues; and
- Part C consisted of 12 questions about the respondents and their lifestyles.

To aid the completion of the instrument by respondents and the processing of the data collected it was decided to develop a dedicated on-line instrument using technical support from within SHU. However, shortage of time and limited resources meant that it was not, on this occasion, possible to construct a relatively sophisticated instrument and the team had to work within the constraints of the MCQ format restriction mentioned earlier.

Once the instrument was on-line access was restricted by means of a username and password until the data collection process had been completed. Because of differences in the timing and content of the induction of new students at SHU and UoS this was a relatively lengthy period. It also meant that the instrument could not be administered in an identical manner at each institution. Hence, the data collected were not strictly comparable. Nonetheless, it was felt that, in the circumstances, the arrangements for completing the instrument were as similar as could be achieved and that, with appropriate disclaimers, the making of comparisons could be justified.

At SHU, all first year students registered on undergraduate degree programmes within the School of Business and Finance, which incorporate Economic and Political Environment (a 20 credit core/compulsory unit) were expected to complete the instrument during their introductory IT workshops. These formed part of an induction programme that was held in the week before the commencement of their formal academic studies. Completing the instrument was one of a series of exercises designed to familiarise students with IT facilities at SHU. However, out of a potential population of approximately 560 students less than half did so. It was subsequently learnt that some of the tutors leading these workshops had not stressed to students the importance of completing the instrument.

At UoS, there was not sufficient opportunity for the students to complete the instrument during their induction. Thus, the 87 students (including 12 from overseas), who had accepted a place to study politics were sent a letter signed by the acting Head of Department and the researcher asking them to access and complete the instrument on-line before joining the course. Approximately two-thirds of the students did so either at home or at local libraries or in internet cafes.

The preamble to the instrument emphasised that it was not a test and that respondents should not look up the answers. It was also made clear that the questionnaire was anonymous and that no individual results would be published. In this way it was hoped to minimise the possibility of 'contaminated' results. That said, given the relatively 'dispersed' nature of the methods used for capturing data, it was clearly impossible to eliminate this altogether.

The instrument was complemented with focus group sessions at each university. These were designed to explore, in a little more depth, student understanding of the reasons for and conduct of the project, as well as the topics covered by the instrument. In the event, they proved to be extremely useful adjuncts to the administration of the instrument. They provided the team with helpful insights into the student perspective and their views on how such research might be developed.

## **Outcomes**

To date there have been three main outcomes and another which has not yet been fully realised.

First, there is the on-line research instrument itself. As indicated earlier, this has always been seen as something which is capable of further development and application elsewhere. There is also the potential to make it more sophisticated in terms of the data it can capture.

A second outcome is the paper presented at the C-SAP conference, which highlighted the processes involved in carrying out the project and incorporated some of the 'headline' findings. The paper is seen as one of the means of sharing the knowledge gained with others. The contents of the paper have been used extensively in preparing this report.

A third outcome is the data generated which is still being processed. Some of the initial findings have been included in an on-line teaching resource. The contents of this resource should be regarded as indicative rather than definitive.

Last, it is intended to use the basic findings of project, together with more extensive and in depth analysis, in an article targeted at a politics/public administration journal. Work on the article has begun, but it is unlikely to be completed until the summer. Again this will serve to publicise the project and the findings more widely. An article on the pilot project undertaken in 2001/2 is due to be published shortly in the next edition of *Teaching Public Administration*.

With respect to the evaluation of the project, there were two main strands. One was the meetings of the focus groups. These provided students with the opportunity, *inter alia*, to give their views on the reasons for, and conduct of, the project. Some of their comments underpin a number of points made in the implications section. The other strand was the conference paper. This enabled peers to assess the project and give their views. It is pleasing to report that, although limited, the feedback was very positive.

Decisions relating to the embedding of the project methodology in the learning environment of 'new' students at SHU and University of Southampton are not in the hands of members of the project team. It is hoped, however, that ways can be found of sustaining the interest generated and ensure that, what is described in the next section as, the 'Hawthorne effect' can be stimulated in future years. That said, the project team would very much like to find colleagues in other institutions who would be interested in building on what has been achieved so far.

## **Implications**

The implications of the PLATO project are wide ranging.

1. With respect to curriculum design, account needs to be taken of the context within which politics is being taught. The differences that were found between UoS and SHU students, while not unexpected, suggest that teaching approaches need some fine-tuning and that standardised curricula, even for introductory courses, should be eschewed.
2. By undertaking this type of exercise it is possible to engender what can best be described as a 'Hawthorne effect'. Students' interest in the project and the areas covered were undoubtedly stimulated by having been asked to complete the instrument.
3. By putting the instrument on-line it was possible to feed the initial findings into the teaching process without delay and while the project was still fresh in the students' minds.
4. The point of student entry to higher education provides a timely 'window of opportunity' for data gathering. Students are generally more willing to cooperate and 'survey fatigue' has not yet set in.
5. The commitment of all colleagues with whom students come into contact at the initial stage of their studies needs to be secured if student engagement is to be maximised.
6. If this type of instrument is to be used on a regular basis then it needs to be constantly updated in order to maintain its 'freshness' and contemporaneity.
7. In order to enhance the credibility of future iterations of the instrument, more account needs to be taken political topics which are of direct concern and/or interest to young people.
8. The data generated could be used in statistics classes for politics students. This would help to address the issue of data relevance that is sometimes raised by social science students when confronted with the challenge involved in getting to grips with quantitative techniques.

## **Resources**

The two principal resources arising from this project, both of which have been mentioned in the outcomes section, are (i) the research instrument and (ii) the teaching resource. These can both be accessed at <http://www.politics.soton.ac.uk/>, by clicking on the PLATO icon.

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