

# Teaching and Learning Issues in the Disciplines

An HEA Funded Project

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## Learning & Teaching in Sociology - A Report by the British Sociological Association

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### Part one – outcomes of focus groups (Max. word count: 5,000)

Please use the box below to provide:

An analysis of the results of your three focus groups. Use your moderator's analysis of all three focus groups as the basis for this section to provide a question by question summary of the responses provided by academics in your learned society/PSRB to the questions posed by the HEA (see the Moderator's Guide) and resultant discussion.

Please note the dates, locations and numbers of attendees at each focus group and any particularly noteworthy details (e.g. were all members of one focus group senior managers, or all new to teaching?).

#### Issues in Learning and Teaching BSA Report

The following discussion around issues in learning and teaching is based on data collected during four focus groups with sociologists currently employed in a variety of 'post 92' universities in England. The participants were either employed within sociology departments or taught sociology to students studying degrees in different areas. The participants are coded with a letter to represent their focus group (A-D) and a number. While this is certainly not a representative sample there are a variety of interesting discussions and comments that help to inform a broad discussion about issues in learning and teaching. Any conclusions must be contextualised by the limited nature of the sample that is presented here. We have tried to reflect the main themes that reoccurred across the meetings. In order to capture some of the nuance and details of comments and ideas that the participants offered, extended quotes are often used. There are six overlapping sections that follow the format of the key questions that each focus group was asked to consider.

#### 1 What are the key resources you use in your own teaching?

Each focus group was asked to consider this question before the meeting. The participants responded by discussion a wide variety of resources for students self directed study including text books (and e-

books), journal articles (particularly at A5 and 6), websites (especially The Conversations, The All Rounder and Open Democracy), book reviews, universities research centres resources, newspapers as well as online resources such as YouTube, Twitter and TED which largely used for teaching in seminars. The following comment neatly captures some of these ideas:

I rely heavily on journals accessed via library databases such as Academic Search premier, plus open access journals, and encourage my students to do likewise for their assignments etc. – probably more so than books (though of course we use these, and increasingly e-books). We also use ‘grey literature’, including research reports etc. from governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations – plus data from these kinds of non-academic sources. I guess you’d say it’s a mainly ‘desk-based research’ model of teaching and learning, which I think is particularly valuable in terms of employability skills – since there are opportunities for students who can research independently in this way.

I should have pointed out that ‘grey literature’ and data from non-academic sources are almost always free and online - and that this kind of teaching and learning requires good searching skills (though journals are much more searchable than books) and, particularly for non-academic sources, very good skills of critical evaluation. It also transforms the role of the librarian (D3 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

One additional resource that was highlighted was the use of secondary data. In particular, C2, a course leader and senior lecture in sociology if sport, noted that he ‘rel[ie]d heavily on the UK data archives, so accessing large-scale data, health survey for England, British Crime Survey, that kind of thing’. A reoccurring issues across the focus groups was discussions of the appropriateness of journal articles especially at A4:

I do find that quite rare, that journals write something that’s appropriate for level four and even level five. I find it quite frustrating, when you’re trying to lead students into more academic sources; they’re just written in quite dense ways. (A1 - senior lecturer in education)

I think most of my teaching’s still based around books, especially the kind of core theory teaching that I do. Was just updating my reading list last week and most of the core sociology modules that we do, journal articles just aren’t particularly appropriate... I guess, when students are trying to get a broad introduction to the subject, just the level that a textbook is pitched at is more appropriate and also they can sometimes quite often get distracted. They may get distracted by the specificity of journals and at that stage, don’t necessarily have the skills to pick out what is relevant from that article and what isn’t. We also put quite a lot of emphasis on the first years being creative with what they learn, so if they learn a general theoretical approach, they’re then encouraged to be able to use that theory and those concepts and apply them to lots of different areas of social life. Rather than necessarily go and find a journal article that does all that work for them already and just copy that down, in some respects, try and sort of steer them away from doing-, from assuming that the answer to everything is out there and they’ve just got to find it, and instead, be a bit more creative. (B3 – Principle lecturer in sociology)

During one focus group there was a discussion around the possibility of key journals in the area (one of which the BSA runs) producing shorted version of key articles which might be of more use for students:

I think the IRSS [International Review for the Sociology of Sport], the 50 years review articles, they’re only about four pages, but it’s on 50 popular topics within sport. There’s a perfect resource there to talk about issues to do with sport, written by leading academics. (A2 – Lecturer in sociology of sport)

The BSA or HEA websites was not thought of as a places where people would consider going for teaching resources, however, there was some discussion of the usefulness of the BSA's annual conference:

when I've gone to conferences, when I first started teaching sociology I wasn't very confident with teaching race, I'm a young white man in South London, a multi-ethnic area, and a lot of my students are black and ethnic minorities. So, I felt if I'm going to be teaching race, it's obviously an important topic, always, but certainly it's important for the lot that I'm teaching, and yet I don't really know much about it. So, I used conferences to clue myself on current perspectives on the field within the discipline. I wouldn't say the conferences give me resources to teach with, but they have improved my confidence (A1 – Senior lecturer in education)

Here, we see a potential for development rather than a concrete opportunity for the BSA's role in learning and teaching. It should also be noted that in order for the BSA and HEA's websites to be considered as sites for resources a level of public engagement would be needed.

## **2 What are the learning and teaching challenges you face in your subject area/discipline?**

During discussions stemming from this question the respondents tended to focus on wide issues within academia. After some prompting these themes were related back to learning and teaching. The following section is broken down into the key themes.

### **Recruitment**

Across all the focus groups the changing shape of higher education and its impact on student recruitment was a consistent them. Tied to the drive towards recruitment were concerns about the lowering of entry requirements and with it student's abilities:

We're under pressure to recruit more, keep the department alive, and that has had a knock on effect on quite a few different aspects of the job. You're having to reduce your UCAS offer, so we're dropping our UCAS offer to quite a way below what I think we would all like it to be, which changes the calibre of students. A lot of them come to us with very different needs, they need much more foundational education in things like writing, basic study skills, research skills. I want to teach them sociology, but a lot of the time I'm having to teach literacy, and that has had a bit of an impact on exactly what I'm able to do with them... It puts you in a catch 22 where you're struggling to retain students, and trying to bring weaker students up to a minimum, rather than moving up those students that are very capable. (A1 – Senior lecturer in education)

For us locally, probably recruiting students of sufficient quality and quantity is one of our biggest challenges. (B3 - Senior lecturer in sociology)

I've had to take out more and more content, I guess, over the years. Things I've given to read, exercises I've set, are too hard for them. I adapted stuff but had to gradually take more content out. (D6 – Principle lecturer in health)

Staff found themselves teaching 'foundational' skills that they believed had not been needed to such a degree in the past. These ideas might also resonate to some degree with the previous discussions about the appropriate 'levelness' of academic journals at A4 whereby previous used texts were no longer as appropriate for contemporary students.

Participants at one focus group made a link between lower recruitment and what they thought to be the disciplines often assumed lack of employability. There was a need to 'sell' sociology by subsuming it within other areas – especially those that have more obvious employability outcomes or recruit

students more reliably:

We run an education and social sciences programme, which is basically sociology, but they've titled it 'education' because people are automatically attracted to that, 'oh we'll be able to go into a teaching role'. (D4 – Lecturer in sociology)

It's probably the majority of people, actually, teaching bits of sociology in things that aren't straight sociology. They're scattered all over the place. And straight sociology has collapsed into criminology anyway. (D5 Professor in sociology of health)

I wonder whether sociology has sort of found itself a little bit in the shadow of media studies and criminology. For sociology, criminology was the cuckoo in the nest that outgrew sociology perhaps? (D3 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

Some of the ideas here will be returned to when discussing issues connected to employability and the potential fragmentation of the discipline. The reduction in the attainment of incoming students, which was previously linked to recruitment pressures, was also discussed as connected to student engagement.

### **Student engagement**

As with many of these topics, there was a lot of over-lap and interlinking during the focus groups. For example, A2 (lecturer in sociology of sport) suggested that, "it's the quality of the student with the lowering of UCAS points, encouraging them to read is one of the biggest issues". The issue of students engaging with self-directed study (in the form of reading) was discussed at length during one focus group. One participant said the big challenge she faced was:

Getting them to read in depth. They don't even read the one thing that you set them to read or the seminar, which is probably the key. To understand that, 'I will send you in the right direction and help you, but you've actually got to do something yourself'. (B1 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

This problem was developed further by B2, a senior lecturer in sociology, who argued that the level of critical engagement was also a problem, "I guess probably related to that is them critiquing/reflecting on material that I feel has decreased in terms of their ability to do that over the last few years". This was confirmed by two other colleagues from the same university who suggested that:

I think some students are confusing information with knowledge, so they will go and seek out information and then think they know things, but they haven't used it in a creative, analytical or critical way at all. (B4 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

It's like that joke, isn't it? Information's knowing that tomatoes are a fruit; knowledge is knowing that you don't put it in a fruit salad. (B6 – Head of sociology department)

Participants linked some of the issues around engagement back to the increasing pressure that many of their students face outside of University life, especially in connection to increasing fees:

I know this is not just about teaching but time is the resource in shortest supply, for our students as well... they're working twenty hours a week and don't immerse themselves in the university culture or their discipline. (D3 Senior lecturer in sociology)

I think students now have got to pay their fees, and that also has a bearing on how much time they can contribute to their studies. (D1 – Programme leader for sociology)

These issues around engagement were also connected to broad discussions around the shift to instrumental types of learning.

### Instrumental learning

There was a strong agreement across the focus groups that students were taking a more instrumental approach to their time at university. This was link to issues connected to employability:

I think the majority of our students here at [our university] come here because they want a degree to get somewhere, and it doesn't matter if it's a 2.2 or a 2.1. Ultimately, nowadays, if you want a fairly decent paid job, you need a degree and they'll just do the bare minimum or whatever it takes to get. (B4 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

After noting that students being motivated by instrumental learning can be used by lecturers A1 suggested that, "it's a challenge, I don't think is necessarily a bad thing, but it can be a bit of a spanner in the works when students are questioning, why am I having to learn this?"

During one focus group there was some discussion around the need to be wary of how sociology fits into such types of learning:

I was just thinking about my first year teaching and probably the biggest thing is resisting the move to more instrumental learning from students. Then constantly saying, 'We're not being assessed on this. There's not an essay on this.' Especially for classical sociology, we have the three middle letters which link the classic to the contemporary, but they're not assessed on that. So a lot of attendance drops off. The other thing is getting students to turn up, and we're probably part of the problem because we put so much online. Everything's on Student Central [The university's VLE]. (B3 – Principle lecturer in sociology)

This move to instrumentality was believed to be connected to the employability agenda.

### Employability

There were a variety of discussions around employability within each focus group. Broadly speaking the participants saw a variety of challenges what were in part embedded in the nature of the discipline. D3 argued that, "we find it hard to teach the fundamentals of academic sociology and also meet the challenges of employability demands". While within another focus group they took a more provocative and rebellious tone by embedding a critique of the employability agenda within their delivery of it. As a result, C2 (course leader and senior lecture in sociology) pointed out that:

... as a team ... we've decided to play this discourse at its own game. We're really focused on this idea of employability, so that's one of the gaps. We don't always call it employability, but we're saying to students at the start of every module, 'We're going to learn about surveillance in a post-modern society. You need to know this because you need to understand that we're living in a world that is increasingly electronic. All your details are online. You need to understand how to use IT.'

This narrative of resistance was captured during a different focus group focus group:

My concern is, if you go down the job market route about employability, future wages, sociologists organise the value of it, but we will lose because other subjects do that better than us. What makes sociology different is that we can resist than kind of discourse. (B4 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

Within these discussions there was also a broad agreement that the employability agenda was something that sociology as a discipline needed to engage with and that it also presented a manner of

demonstrating the skills that are embedded in the subject:

Sociology in and of itself, provides the skills people need in a society after they're finished at university, because it's critical thinking, working in groups, understanding how each other work. I mean, I came to sociology late and that's why I'm a bit of an evangelical sociologist. If I'd known about these growing interactions of interconnectivity, I would have been a better manager because I would have been able to explain what was going on to my staff. (B8 – Senior research fellow)

So while there were discussions around the potential negative effects that could accompany a focus on employability there was also a clear commitment to the benefits of developing critical sociological thinking as essential skills for the workplace.

### **Fragmentation**

In various ways the focus group participants also connected some of these previously discussed issues with the notion that sociology was becoming increasingly fragmented:

Sociology is becoming more and more fragmented into different disciplines, same thing happened with social policy, into criminology and health studies... A lot of the time you're teaching students sociology without telling them that's what you're doing. (D6 – Principle lecture in the sociology of health)

In sociology of sport, we all work in education or sport science. We have a collective professional identity and we go to our own conferences, but then day-to-day teaching you find yourself subsumed within a different department with its own agenda. For me, that's challenging when you're one of two or three people in your immediate group who has a sociological perspective. (D7 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

Institutional elements were also thought to play a part in this process. For example, the size of departments in many universities delivering 'straight' sociology often leave a very narrow range of expertise in small departments, making it tough to coordinate shared teaching/research and collaboration:

One of the things is resourcing, or staffing, sometimes there's not enough of a range of expertise within sociology. In our team we're quite diverse but it'd be good to have more people within different areas of sociology because it's such a wide-ranging area. (D1 – Programme leader for sociology)

Because we're a relatively small group we each focus on our own areas, there aren't clusters of people with shared interests to facilitate shared teaching and research... One of the implications for the curriculum is that we can't offer as wide a range of courses as we'd like, our curriculum doesn't look as attractive as it could in a larger sociology department. (D3 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

In a different focus group this issue was broadened out and linked back to instrumental learning:

There seems to be this sense that knowledge is fragmented and particularised. Actually, what we all know, is that it's all linked together and it's all something, and no lecture stands alone from any other lecture and no module stands alone from each other, but they seem to feel that they turn up to this lecture because it directly relates to an essay that I'm going to write,' and actually they haven't worked out that to sort of have a good essay, it will flow through from other modules, other lectures, other reading and that knowledge is something that is constructed in the wider world, rather than just in one, one hour lecture. (B5 – Senior lecturer)



in sociology)

These over-lapping issues will be further developed in other sections of this report.

### **3 How do you think the teaching in your subject area is likely to evolve over the next few years?**

Building on some of the previously discussed issues connected to the changing face of academia the participants considered fees and increasing moves towards the commercialisation of education to be worrying trends. Of particular concern were movements towards increasingly outcome-oriented approach in all of HE, where meeting targets and passing students supersedes academic standards:

We are being pushed to meet key performance indicators, and being forced to be more generous with our marking. Our courses have become so geared towards getting students through assessments that any sociological stuff goes out the window. (D6 – Principle lecturer in the sociology of health)

I've felt like my teaching has to be great otherwise where's our future? Students don't really come on my programme for sociology, but if I can deliver teaching that's going to score high on the satisfaction scales, that's where our future will be. (D7 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

The major constraint is around workload and the pressures around that. When you have a lot of competing duties, running modules, module administration, research type roles as well, it's ensuring that you have the time to put the effort into your teaching materials. (C2 – Course leader and senior lecturer in sociology)

Such issues were further developed during one focus group through a discussion of the National Student Survey (NSS). C2 found the NSS to be particularly unhelpful citing the impact he believed it had on the values of the discipline:

On the one hand, I'm teaching students to be critical of quantitative methods, and in the next breath I'm asking them to fill in a module evaluation form or do the NSS which asks them to quantify their experience. So you've got this drive towards technology enhanced learning, which I wholeheartedly support, because I think it engages learners in different ways, particularly the types of learners we get at old polytechnics, which is great, but again, you've got that paradox that you're teaching about surveillance and now talking about how surveillance has become this hazy thing that governs our everyday lives, and we're not sure how or why, and then you're asking them to submit an assignment online. (C2 – Course leader and senior lecturer in sociology)

Broadening the discussion back to the previously highlighted issues in academic A1 neatly brought some of these ideas together:

I think with the changes that are underway in the industry, partly this issue of putting bums on seats we talked about a minute ago, but also the context within which students are now entering is that they're paying a lot more money. That might manifest in this very instrumental, you owe me a ticket to a good job. They're consumers, and you have to provide me with a good service, and that's the whole student satisfaction thing. We've had this conversation before, when you're in a multidisciplinary course where you've got physiology, you've got pedagogy and you've got social sciences, *one of the things we can offer is we can make what they're learning really exciting and really fun. Being a good teacher is not only important for the sake of you should be anyway, but you should be doing that now because that's going to become a key component of our self preservation.* (A1 – Senior lecturer in education – emphasis added)

Of particular interest here is the manner in which the opportunities that are embedded within social science for 'exciting' teaching are situated within the survival of such disciplines. While it might be important to resist elements of the marketization of academia there was also various notes about the many in which such changes might have positive influences on learning and teaching. A2 (lecturer in sociology of sport) linked this back to the employability agenda:

The employability agenda, that's embedded in some of the stuff you're saying, how is this going to get me a job? I think that we can embed that in our teaching relatively easily. These are the situations we have, but we have to use them as opportunity. I wonder if there's an element there of needing to embed employability in our degrees, especially our degrees, we teach on, where you don't walk into a job, and our subject area, you don't go and be a sociologist unless you do what we do. However, all the information that we teach helps them get jobs. My comment is how do we make it very clear that the knowledge they're getting is directly linked to getting them a job? Is that something we can embed in our teaching better? Because I personally think it is.

Returning to the issues of fragmentation the participants from one focus group thought that this process might well continue:

Maybe all the sociology departments, what's left of them, will do all the sociology modules for business degrees. At the same time they could maintain themselves as a little group of sociologists. Why not? Sometimes I feel this is a sort of model for higher education in the future, and it might not be so bad, really... This (being fragmented/subsumed) could apply to history as well, as a discipline. 'You want to go into this area, you need to know the history of it; where did it come from, why is it happening?' That would make us feeder subjects – the languages are like that too, they barely exist on their own. (D5 – Professor in sociology of education)

Focusing on some positive movements within the sociology of health B9, a reader in health sciences argued that:

On the positives, from the health perspective, the influence of sociology and all social sciences, has really come to the fore, with some dreadful things that have triggered that, like the Mid Staffs scandal, then all the pressures there are at the moment on the health service, that what we're seeing is the value of social science and its contribution to nurse education specifically. There are commissioners and deans of nursing that have got involved in it... The other thing, what I'm seeing more generally in social theory is that optimistic, future looking. Not just critiquing. It's, 'What's the future going to look like?' The energy that's come from more progressive thinking about, 'We can make a difference if we do it this way.' The NHS, believe it or not, is really community health and really grasping some of those ideas. In our field, even though we've got these pressures on us, there are these little bits of shifts that are going on, and momentum to think more positively about what these viewpoints/this perspective can bring as change, in health and social care.

This discussion of the increasing presence of sociology in certain disciplines might marry neatly with previous discussions around employability. This is especially the case as there have been shifts within social theory towards a more 'optimistic' outlook. Such comments link neatly to the movement towards 'public sociology' that have been debated within the discipline over the last ten years or so.

Movements to online delivery, online learning and online recourses were discussed across the focus groups:

I've found that the use of electronic things like video clips, twitter and things like that are really engaging... there's some great video clips that we use and I think that's being utilised more now. (D4 – Lecturer in sociology)



Greater digital literacy for lecturers to bring social media more into the classroom. (D7 – Lecturer in sociology)

Then they tend to rely on the Internet because it offers quick fixes, or they think it does. You see a lot of the quick sound bites in the first year essays, I've noticed, but even when you pick them up on it, it still comes out. (B1 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

These points connected to recourses and teaching where developed into discussions around the future of the discipline and academia in general:

The fact that lots of materials are being made available online and lots of well-known sociologists now have a lot of material online, to what extent do universities try and compete with the online delivery and get a bit lost and have nothing more to offer over and above what other people do better already? (B4 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

I think the future's shaped by the institution in lots of ways. Quite a political framework, and I imagine this drive to colonisation so that we have to give distant lectures to people in China, which is going to become a new market, but it's like an apocalyptic future for sociology. I mean we will survive because sociology has always survived, hasn't it? (B7 – Reader in sport and leisure cultures)

Greater use of online technologies was discussed as possibly undermining face-to-face teaching – possibly reduce staff numbers on courses even further – and also threatens students' research and interpersonal skills:

One problem would be seeing a massive shift for online teaching which is cutting contact teaching time... how much teaching time would we get if it all shifted to a digital platform? (D4 – Lecturer in sociology)

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Clearly, the on-going and perhaps intensifying 'digital transformation' was considered an issue for the participants on a variety of levels.

#### **4 What gaps can you identify in the current coverage of teaching and learning resources for your subject discipline?**

The focus groups tended to have less well developed answers for this question. However, the following comments built on the discussions about the 'levelness' of articles:

I sometimes find myself wishing there were some materials that were best practice teaching for first years, just some different ideas. (A1 – Senior lecturer in Education)

It's not to dumb it down, but you used the example earlier of the International Review doing these 50 classic articles on the sociology of sport, literally four to six pages long. If there was something like that every year, done by the BSA, that then could be used as a level four, a first year resource. (A2 – Lecturer in sociology of sport)

It was noted that these resources were improved when they related to contemporary issues/topics. For example, C1 (Senior lecturer in sociology) noted that he teaches on:

... a first year undergrad module which is delivered to sociology and criminology students, and it's around social movements and the police, and of protest, and I can talk about things like the 2011 riots, the 2010/2011 students movement, the Arab spring. It's bringing in lots of contemporary examples of things that they've seen on their TV or their newsfeeds, and using that to hook peoples' imaginations.

Again, the BSA was highlighted as an organisation that could be effectively used to meet these requirements. C1 (Senior lecturer in sociology) argued that:

Anything the BSA could do there in terms of workshops, seminars, publications around teaching sociology would be beneficial. I know the American Sociological Association has one or two teaching sociology journals. I don't believe there are any associated with the BSA.

As previously noted, C2 (course leader and senior lecture in sociology) believed that this would help encourage greater inclusivity across the discipline.

Gaps were evident in the ability for organisations such as the BSA to offer help in teaching sociology. C1 (Senior lecturer in sociology) stated that 'The BSA does come across as very much a research driven institution which is about promoting sociological research, not necessarily about promoting best practice in teaching methods'. One participant praised the work of both the ESRC and Radical Statistics. C2 (course leader and senior lecture in sociology) noted that 'Radical Statistics have developed a lot of workshops and materials around teaching statistics within sociology, particularly around the social construction of statistics to try and destabilise this notion that numbers equal hard facts'. Similarly, C2 argued that he would like a 'repository of information that I could use post-event in my teaching'. C2 was specifically referring to the BSA Annual Conference and the lack of provision that was provided, post-conference.

However, within two focus groups there was also a set of comments around their already being too many resources:

[Reading resources are] one of the least of our problems now. If we were sitting here ten years ago I'd agree it was an issue but actually I think it's one of our strengths now. (D3 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

That is the problem now, it's not a lack of resources, it's having too much, and like I said, being able to sift through what's good and what's not. That takes a lot of our time, seeing whether they're worth putting up for students. A surplus of information takes time (D6 – Principle lecturer in sociology of health)

I'm just thinking about the premise of the question, the gaps in the resources. There aren't many gaps for me, there's tons and tons of stuff you can use. There must be a new sociology of sport textbook published every year, they get churned out, and they're great, problem is there's too many of them and you don't know which one to order. (A2 – Lecturer in sociology of sport)

In one focus group this question was answered with a focus on the BSA's role in campaigning for sociology and linking to undergraduate students:

They could do a bit more campaigning for us, couldn't they, like, you know, the Campaign for Social Sciences? That's, an individual's just picked that up and taken that. I wonder if the BSA

could go broader with a campaign to institutions of education and local councils and things like that? (B3 – Principle lecturer in sociology)

What might be interesting is, in what way do the BSA speak to undergrad students and Master students, because when we were undergrad students, I remember the first year we had to sign up to a journal called Sociology Review, and we were sort of aware of the BSA through a sociology society? (B6 – Head of sociology department)

Other subjects do it and are much more active in, both the A-Level grouping and second year undergrad. Sociology's competing with psychology and it's quite stark. Some colleges have five/six classes in psychology, and probably only two sociology. So until they're doing some more work, the gaps, I think, are slightly earlier. (B5 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

While this last element does not constitute recourse issue it is perhaps of interest to the BSA.

## **5 Thinking back to question 2, what gaps might emerge in the near future, given the projected evolution of teaching and learning in your subject?**

In answering this question the participants developed some of the previously discussed points. Firstly, the move to online teaching and resources:

I think it's quite worrying with this shift to online stuff, we might be made obsolete before too long, if everybody starts offering distance learning, you can sign up thousands of people from all over the world and charge them the earth from a crappy online education that's basically a video capture of you three years ago. I don't think it's that bleak yet, but there are some signs it's going that way. If there are any gaps it'll be us, with good pedagogy, who can meet them one and one and help them. If universities continue down this race to the bottom in terms of efficiency and balancing the books, that would be a big worry, not enough staff and not enough face time. (A1 – Senior lecturer in education)

A connected point was made by D7 (Senior lecturer in sociology) who argued that:

There are a lot of these online things, e-learning techniques and resources that perhaps haven't been thought through but pushed out on fetishizing this idea of doing things differently, 'oh it must be good if you're using a computer in class'. I'm not convinced.

In accordance with the answers provided to question 4, C2 (senior lecturer in sociology) argued for more information on teaching methods and practices during annual conferences. Indeed, this coalesced with the desire for developing a network that could help aid teaching. C1 (course leader and senior lecturer in sociology) stated that:

An initial step might be a section of the BSA website around teaching sociology. Some sort of online forum where people could get the debate and discussion started, and then examples of best practice. Dotted around the country, I have come across examples of excellence in teaching particular methodological perspectives, particular substantive subjects, and if there was a way of disseminating them more widely, that would be appreciated.

C2 related this to changes in student employability. With regards to teaching sociology, C2 argued that the BSA should help to 'de-myth ... [the] idea that sociologists are all left leaning, socially awkward hippies. To make them [students] understand there is more to what we do than that, and help them to do that through the teaching methods we talked about'. These ideas can be further linked to the discussion of employability:

I do think embedding stuff into the curriculum is one of the ways to answer this problem. It's an opportunity, and something we need to do for them. When I teach them interactionist theory, we use the example of the job interview, and that's just a way to weave something in. So, yes, it's absolutely relevant and helpful, and part of it is just to, A, embed it all, and B, make them know what it is they're learning. (A1 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

Staying on top of employment opportunities, but, as I said, I didn't leave university, so then being aware, continually, each year, of what they can do with what you're teaching. I never did, so I can't really speak from experience in that regard. (A2 – Lecturer in sociology of sport)

As the reader will hopefully tell, there is a neat overlapping off issues that tie into changes in technology, the employability agenda and the BSA's place as an advocate for sociology. The discussions in the final section, in part, bring these ideas together.

## **6 Can you think of any other ways in which your PSRB, learned society or the HEA could support and advance learning and teaching in your subject-based practice?**

When answering this question the focus group participants tended to focus on the place of the BSA as an advocate for sociology and a space that could (although currently was not) support the teaching of sociology. A1 (senior lecturer in education) captured this importance of the BSA being an advocate for good sociology teaching:

I think we need to be more active in just getting across this message that teaching is really very, very important, and teaching can't be done by people who aren't good teachers. Student satisfaction, it matters and there are things we can do to enhance it, we need to make the administrators know that we're really valuable because we're good teachers and that's what their bread and butter is. If there's anything the BSA and HEA could do, it would be to mobilise that sentiment a lot more. Obviously research is important and we want to push that agenda as well, but we need to take stock and realise that teaching and defending our base, that needs to be taken quite seriously.

Developing this point A2 (lecturer in sociology of sport) suggested the need for more support for PhD student from Universities, this is certainly something which the BSA and HEA could take an active role in:

It needs to start somewhere and we talked about the fact that when you do a PhD, your research is important, but perhaps there's not enough teaching opportunities made available for PhD students. So, you may have a fantastic PhD and a great research project, and the opportunities to take that further, but you need the experience of teaching, otherwise you're not going to get a foot in the door as a lecturer. In creating good teachers and helping to ensure good teaching, perhaps there needs to be more training during their PhD. So, universities should make an effort to incorporate PhD students in all their teaching, even if it's just seminars or tutorials.

Others discuss the BSA place as an advocate for sociology and tied this to the employability agenda:

It would be really useful if the BSA had some life stories of famous people that have done sociology and think about how that might have helped them to get to where they are. The other thing is, BSA should try and find out a bit more about what employers want because it's not true that employers don't want sociologists. A lot of employers, particularly during the 80s when Thatcherism came around, wanted people who were flexible, critical, analytical, and in a fast moving world with companies restructuring, needing people who could think on their feet. This idea now and in the future, what kind of jobs and firms are coming up, and what role can

sociologists play in that? What skills are needed? (B6 – Head of sociology department)

Not that we have to sit them through an employability module, I don't think we have to do that, but I think we can tell them, 'You're good as a sociology student because you do, this, this, this and this and this,' you know, and I think BSA could probably push that agenda a bit more for us and then we can push it. (B4 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

The lack of public understanding of what sociology is, and an absence of sociologists on television, I think we're all very aware of academic historians and psychologists of some type, but where are the sociologists? ...Part of sociology's problem overall is that perhaps people don't understand what it is. It's a marketing issue. (D2 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

It is important to consider that other participants offered correctives during these discussions and highlighted the need to be wary of fully jumping on the employability 'bandwagon'. C1 expressed concerns regarding the changes that employability was having on the discipline, in particular, the removal of certain topics that were perceived to lack employable skills such as research methods. C1 noted that this was a difficult subject that students struggled to engage with. As a result, due to low student feedback certain topics would eventually fall victim to a market driven ideology, underpinned by an over-reliance on 'student experience'.

There was also a suggestion that the BSA could facilitate an employability-focused network which pulls together recent and older graduates from sociology to help inspire current students; to provide diverse range of placement opportunities; and also change image of sociology as an 'unemployable' discipline:

If we had the time, resources and the network to get more consistently and continuously involved with those schools with help from the BSA as well to make something a bit more enduring. (D3 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

We could be better networked together within and between institutions, with schools, we can pass on these ideas and let them know what we're looking for. That will hopefully improve students' perception of sociology and the profile of the discipline. (D7 – Senior lecturer in sociology)

One of the opportunities which was discussed in connection to the employability agenda was linked to enquiry based learning:

We use (enquiry based learning) in some of our modules, where you don't structure it around lectures and get students to do the enquiring, very student lead, but you base it on issues or problems that have arisen in practice around the world, or locally. We've used that in public health modules and it works so well because you've got trust that they're going to go away and learn, which is quite scary. They look at the classics, like obesity and alcohol, but also some really interesting topics as well, breastfeeding. (B9 – Principle lecturer in health sciences)

This sort of teaching was thought to be relatively underused in sociology teaching. As such, there appears to be an opportunity for developing curriculum and resources along this line. C1 (senior lecturer in sociology) argued that:

Anything the BSA could do there in terms of workshops, seminars, publications around teaching sociology would be beneficial. I know the American Sociological Association has one or two teaching sociology journals. I don't believe there are any associated with the BSA.

In various ways the participants thought there was lots of room for improvement with how the BSA

could support learning and teaching. This was specifically discussed in relation to the annual conference and the BSA ability to organise a central network and workshops. Specifically, the issue of employability seems to be a place which appears in the need of exploring.

## Part two – learned society / PSRB reflection and commentary (Max. word count: 3,000)

*Please use the box below to respond to the following prompts:*

Reflecting on the results contained in Part one, how does the learned society / PSRB respond? What particular feedback do you want to give to the HEA? Are your members' views a surprise, if so in what ways? Or were the responses predicted and in line with previous experience? Are there particular contexts that help explain your focus group outcomes, perhaps particular restraints or requirements in your discipline that need explaining to a wider audience?

This is a timely report, albeit on a particular part of the Sociology teaching sector, as the focus of the BSA has been shifting recently from being mostly research focussed to research and teaching focussed. We will be interested in reading the overall summary findings of the wider HEA project.

We note the short timeframe within which the project had to operate and the very limited time that organisations had to complete their part in the project. Having secured agreement to proceed and identified project workers, the BSA report researchers had 8 weeks to organise and host the focus groups, produce transcripts and summarise their findings.

The research concentrated on post-92 universities and the problems that were identified may be specific to this particular part of the sector and should not be taken as indicative of experience in Russell Group or 94 Group universities. It may be the case that in post-92 universities teaching may be more journal and monograph focused whereas in Russell Group and 94 Group universities, which have major research orientation, teaching may be much more research-led. Nevertheless, for the purpose of the HEA project, the findings offer valuable insights into teaching and learning issues in Sociology for teachers working in post '92 universities. As the situation may or may not be similar at other universities, we recommend that a similar exercise be conducted with a group of Russell Group and 94 Group universities to determine whether the experiences recounted in the focus groups for this project are or are not similar.

The report highlights a perception that BSA can and should be doing more to support good teaching practice in Sociology. However, the BSA is not about research OR teaching, it is about Sociology as a profession more generally (which incorporates both these things and much more). We do not think it is the BSA's role to suggest best teaching practice; that is the role of the HEA or universities. The BSA could, however, offer spaces for good teaching practice to be shared and developed, for example in workshops and online.

It was not surprising to see difference of opinion and reported usage of teaching materials, e.g. in respect of journal articles. There is a wide range of practice in the use of resources across institutions and within institutions which is tailored to the students and the circumstances in which teaching is taking place. Anecdotally, some teachers rely heavily on journals and others rely heavily on texts with many in between using a blend of wide range of resources depending on the context of their teaching and most encouraging students in their own literature searches. What is clear is that teachers need a broad range of pedagogic options to suit different types of audience and to keep their teaching varied and inspirational.



Problems with particular aspects of teaching, such as the teaching of theory at undergraduate level, are also not surprising. Theory has never been easy to teach using journal articles, certainly not before final year, and we imagine that much of what is being said in the Sociology focus groups would apply to other disciplines. The identification of helpful practical ways to address the teaching of theory at undergraduate level perhaps through the sharing of 'ways that work' in workshops might be a helpful development.

In respect of the Teaching Excellence Framework, we are aware that this is the subject of much debate at present. We do not think that there is a role for scholarly associations in respect of the proposed TEF other than supporting our discipline by keeping them informed, providing sign-posting to information and resources, and offering workshops on teaching in higher education. The BSA should be involved in advice and consultation, supporting as much as possible as it did, for example, in relation to core curriculum and in work with the former CSAP. We do not, however, believe that it would be appropriate for the BSA to be involved directly in any assessment or accreditation work, as this is something that our members have always wanted us to avoid.

With regard to resources, the suggestion of shortened articles from the journals currently supported by the BSA (Sociology, Work, Employment & Society, Cultural Society, and Sociological Research Online) is an interesting one. Sociologists (many of whom are members of the BSA) produce textbooks and/or write for publications such as Discover Society, The Sociology Review, and The Conversation etc. Currently the BSA does not produce shortened versions of journal articles and we do not see a place for the BSA to start doing this, as others already do this. We would, however, encourage sociologists to both provide an accessible introduction to their current work and to offer summary articles for publication in the existing outlets. We believe that more academics should be doing this in these kinds of outlets/publications both to help teachers and to promote the work that sociologists do to a wider audience.

The BSA introductory online and hard copy text 'Discover Sociology' and the associated website currently under development for pre-tertiary teachers could offer a useful resource, and Discover Society is also a useful resource for teachers. Undergraduate students already seem to find Discover Society useful. The new publication from Policy Press, Sociologists' Tales, and the BSA Sociologists Outside Academia Group might also offer some of the information relating to employability that teachers may be seeking. In addition, the publication of more book review essays in journals and other outlets might be a helpful teaching resource.

In respect of the BSA developing a conference repository of information that teachers could use post-event in their teaching (referring specifically to the BSA Annual Conference and the lack of provision that was provided post-conference) we do not think that it is the role of the BSA (and the BSA does not currently have the capacity) to produce and supply teaching resources. However, some associations do keep an online repository of papers presented at their conferences and this we could do but only if we were supplied with full papers by the presenters. In the past presenters were asked to provide hard copies of their papers for delegates to obtain at conference but so many did not provide them it became more of the point of complaint and disappointment for delegates than a beneficial service. With technological advancement we might reconsider whether this could be done again but online.

Thinking about the comments on employability. We recognise the opportunity in teaching Sociology to help the discipline more broadly. Employability may be seen as a problem for Sociology teachers but it should be an opportunity. Sociology can instil real and significant transferrable skills that are of great value in the job market. For example, critical thinking, research skills, handling and analysing data, statistics, report writing, and understanding of wider social and

political issues and forces. These are not 'add-ons' to the fundamentals of Sociology. These can and should be at the centre of teaching. The issue may perhaps be about making clearer to students what skills they have developed, how they can utilise these skills and how they can sell themselves in the job market by highlighting these skills. Teaching about how sociological skills are highly valued by employers can be hugely empowering for teachers, students and the discipline as whole.

We recognise how important it is that teachers make their teaching relevant, contemporary, applicable and also interesting. Students can get bored with Marx, Weber and Durkheim. What teachers have to get across is how these (and others) help us to understand the world we live in. Crucially, teachers have to flag up to students how understanding and applying these ideas is a key skill. For example, a lot of what Marx, Weber and Durkheim were writing about was how organisations and the economy work. Having a good understanding of the workings of organisations and the economy is (just one) key transferrable skill.

The traditional idea of Sociology is that it is a feeder discipline. It is a theoretical subject which produces knowledge, which more 'applied' subjects then take and apply/use. We still need theoretical sociologists i.e. those producing the big ideas, but increasingly Sociology needs to realise that it must also be applying and using the ideas it generates and not leaving this to someone else. If (for example) you read a marketing or business studies textbook, many of the ideas they draw on and employ are sociological. Many sociologists might feel uncomfortable applying their skills to help big businesses, but there is no reason why we can't apply our skills, knowledge and understanding to help more socially worthwhile causes and businesses.

In the past, the focus and membership of the BSA was almost exclusively higher education and tenured academics. Over the last 20 years or so, there has been a gradual shifting of emphasis to the primary charitable aim of the Association i.e. promoting Sociology. This has encouraged the Association to look beyond its previous, self-imposed boundaries and has seen us becoming more open, inclusive and nurturing. The aim has been to foster an ethos of support and development across the career path. For example, where once the Executive was made up almost exclusively of senior academics, now it includes early careers researchers and sociologists working outside academia; where once study groups and postgraduates operated at arm's length to the Executive, increasingly they have active direct communication links to the Board of Trustees (for example through the BSA Advisory Forum) and annual financial support for targeted activities to support need in their constituencies. One specific strategic vision in the BSA's current 5 year plan has been to 'strengthen its links with schools and colleges' and this has already begun to shift our focus from mostly research to teaching *and* research in increasingly equal measure.

The BSA effectively merged with the former Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences, established a new database of all teachers of Sociology in secondary schools across the UK, and has been developing a programme of activities designed to improve the promotion and support of the teaching and understanding of Sociology in schools. This meets our charitable aim and is a strategic activity designed to help ensure the future flow of Sociology students into Sociology degrees to sustain the discipline. The programme of work has led to the establishment of regional teaching day conferences for secondary teachers and these have helped to open our eyes to teaching issues in the discipline at secondary level. HE teachers that have been involved in these days are now becoming more active and we recently held a pilot day conference on Teaching Sociology in HE based on the format of the secondary teacher conferences. The current research indicates that there may be growing demand for specialist support and training for Sociology teachers at HE and the BSA could look to support and encourage the development of Sociology

specific HE teaching workshops.

In relation to the points made in the report about campaigning and public sociology, it is interesting to note that some sociologists are not aware of the key role played by the BSA in the establishment of and continued support for the Campaign for Social Science. The BSA (through its Chief Executive) was directly responsible along with two other activist learned societies, in the establishment of the Campaign for Social Science. The Chief Executive was a member of the first Executive Board of the Campaign for Social Science, the BSA provides annual financial support for the work of the Campaign, and sociologists continue to play an active role in the work of the Campaign both in on the road campaigning activities and in the production of campaign materials such as the 'Making the Case for Social Science' hard copy and online materials. For the past 5 years the BSA has organised, with the British Library, an annual 'Equality Lecture' which speaks to one of the core uniting themes of sociologists and this event is the only truly public activity that we run (anyone can attend and bookings are taken directly via the British Library website). Speakers are chosen because they are high profile and have a direct connection through their work to the theme of equality. The 2015 speaker was Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty. The Equality Lectures as well as the plenary events at our Annual Conference are filmed and available online via our website as potential teaching resources. This activity and the production of other non-filmed materials speak directly to calls for a more proactive public Sociology and one that speaks to government.

The BSA has also been developing materials to promote Sociology to secondary students in support of the programme of activity around secondary schools. The Association produced its hard copy and online leaflet 'Discover Sociology' directly for secondary students thinking about taking sociology as a GCSE or A level but also for a public audience who may be coming to sociology for the first time. The material is available as a hard and online in leaflet and poster format. This material has also proved helpful for university open days and introductory lectures for undergraduates. We are currently working on the expansion of these materials to a new satellite website for teachers designed to sign-post high quality teaching resources for secondary teachers and a new promotional tool to help undergraduates. In producing these materials we are very conscious that the vast majority of undergraduates will not go on to postgraduate study and jobs in academia and already recognise the importance of showing students both the range of employment that is open to them and the great value of the skills they learn during their degree to employers.

The BSA will continue to add to its own resources and to sign-post to other resources but we note that the BSA and the HEA are professional organisations, not resources in themselves. For resource one needs to look at journals or online publications such as Discover Society or textbooks or other audio-visual material. It is not the role of the BSA or HEA to be/become an online textbook.

In short, the BSA does not see its role as one of effectively providing teacher training. It is, however, concerned that provision may not be all it could be within HE institutions. We will continue to promote Sociology which includes supporting the work of sociologists in whatever appropriate ways we can (for example by providing space for workshops for our members) and we look to universities and organisations established specifically to support and improve teaching, such as the HEA, to offer initiatives to address the practical teaching needs identified in the report.

### Part three – solutions and desirable outcomes (Max. word count: 2,000)

Please use the box below to respond to the following prompts:

Given the results of the focus groups, and in particular the gaps, challenges and future developments noted by the participants, what responses by your own body and / or the Higher Education Academy would best address the needs of your members and the discipline in an HE context?

Note where interventions have already been tried and may have not succeeded, or be work in progress. Also note where, in your opinion, the learned society / PSRB could take the lead in any desired action, where the HEA could take the lead, or where a joint solution is preferred, and why?

#### **Proposed joint BSA/ HEA project to address needs**

The BSA undertook some earlier research with HEA funding which looked at how postgraduates were taught how to teach (Ursula Edgington principal researcher) which showed that provision was at best patchy, non-sociology specific or non-existent. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the HEA on some follow up research perhaps looking at the potential place for Sociology-specific teaching practice for Sociology postgraduates.

#### **Proposed NEW BSA developments to address needs**

- Following our first pilot workshop for Teaching Sociology at HE, we propose a workshop on Teaching Sociology in HE, at the BSA Annual Conference, making use of the findings of this report and the assistance of the researchers that were involved in the project
- We have a Teaching Group but it's for secondary school teachers and there may be some confusion about who it's for. We propose a possible expansion of the spaces that we provide to support the sharing of good practice in teaching and to discuss with our existing Teaching Group a possible change of label and adding a new separate one to differentiate between secondary and HE teaching.
- The BSA does not have an HE teaching group or network at present and would be supportive of such an initiative should volunteers step forward to run it.
- Filmed interviews with teachers about what's worked for them (we have a proposal already in the pipeline)

#### **Possible other NEW BSA developments to address needs**

- We may reconsider new ways of gathering and presenting research papers that are presented at our Annual Conference.

#### **Existing activities that BSA will continue to support / develop**

- Publication of research
- Provision of space to present / share research (conferences, workshops etc.)
- Postgraduate Forum, annual conference, regional day events
- Early Careers Forum, research development funding, regional day events
- Teaching Group conferences and prizes (we provide prizes for GCSE and A Level students)
- Promotional materials across the career path (hard copy and online)
- Website resources for teaching at introductory level (website in development and suitable for transition between A level and undergraduate)
- Annual BSA Conference (including filming of plenaries as an online resource) (good source

- of teaching resources)
- Annual Equality Lecture (including filming as an online resource)
- Study group (research network) events (50 + per year) (good source of teaching resources on specific areas)
- Higher level campaigning work and campaign backing

### Unsuccessful interventions

- The BSA trialled a ‘professional’ / ‘teaching’ stream at BSA annual conferences without much success. Feedback at the time told us that conference delegates come to present and discover new research and do not view the annual conference as a place where CPD might happen. They did not like the idea of mixing the two (‘CPD is what I do when I’m at my HE institution, not what I expect or want to do when I’m at my subject association’s conference’). For this reason, we would not recommend reintroducing a teaching stream at our annual conference at this time.
- The BSA used to run a teaching prize for Excellence in Teaching Sociology at HE, first jointly funded with CSAP and then jointly funded with the HEA but nominations were notably hard to attract. Feedback at the time told us that HE teachers were reluctant to put themselves forward because they viewed what they did as ‘just my job’, ‘everyone does it and I don’t think it’s right that one gets rewarded above another who’s doing exactly the same’. We would not recommend reintroducing a prize for HE teaching at this time.

### Notes

- This report is to be formatted in MS Word using this template;
- No names of participants of the focus groups are to be included in your report, and any quotations should not be attributed to individuals;
- Submission of your report will be taken to mean the HEA has the right to use all information contained within the report in any publication it might make on the outcomes of this project;
- It is due by the 15 July 2015;
- It should be sent to Stephen Bulman at [Stephen.bulman@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.bulman@heacademy.ac.uk)
- If for any reason your report will be delayed, please contact Stephen Bulman.

For reference, the questions provided by the HEA are listed below.

### The Questions

The following questions should be used in each focus group.

Question 1 is to be used in the form of a pre-task for the focus group members. It should be sent, along with a form for collecting the responses, to the focus group participants at least a week before the focus group, by the PSRB / learned society. Responses should be collected by the moderator at the start of the focus group and should be the starting point for the discussion.

#### 7 What are the key resources you use in your own teaching?

- For subject knowledge/skills/pedagogy
- Include books, text books, journals, websites, databases, other
- Your institution’s own material
- Information from sector-owned or based organisations such as Learned Society/PSRB/subject association, Higher Education Academy, other organisation
- Events and services (conferences, seminars, webinars) online courses, databases, networks

For the foregoing, please identify, which are free and which paid for, and be specific and detailed where possible, indicating titles of books, journal articles etc. Why are these the key resources? You may want to assess what each resource brings to the teaching of the subject? What are the key strengths of the resource? Are there any limitations within the resource? Can you think of possible improvements?

**8 What are the learning and teaching challenges you face in your subject area/discipline?**

- Highlighting in particular those challenges that are particularly relevant to this discipline context.

Why do you say that? Why do you see these as a challenge to the subject? You may want to assess how these could be overcome?

**9 How do you think the teaching in your subject area is likely to evolve over the next few years?**

- As above, highlighting the particular challenges expected in the discipline or exploring how more generic challenges may differentially impact within the discipline.

Why do you say that? Why do you see the teaching in the subject going in this direction? Is this positive or negative? Why do you say that? What is driving this change/evolution in teaching?

**10 What gaps can you identify in the current coverage of teaching and learning resources for your subject discipline?**

List the gaps.

**4B How might your PSRB/Learned Society or the HEA best address the identified gaps?**

Why do you say that?

**11 Thinking back to question 2, what gaps might emerge in the near future, given the projected evolution of teaching and learning in your subject?**

Why do you say that? How can these be overcome?

**12 Can you think of any other ways in which your PSRB, learned society or the HEA could support and advance learning and teaching in your subject-based practice?**



# Sheffield Hallam University

*Learning & Teaching in Sociology - A Report by the British Sociological Association*

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