

The History of Interdisciplinary Human Studies

Origins

When the University of Bradford received its charter in 1966 it was still a mainly technological institution. Soon, however, the new University saw the need to develop in the humanities and social sciences. As a result, the early 1970s saw the founding of several new departments. Of these, Interdisciplinary Human Studies which uniquely would link the older arts subjects and the newer social sciences, was intellectually the most wide-ranging.

It had been felt that the University should not try to imitate the numerous single-honours courses which existed elsewhere in subjects such as English, philosophy, psychology and sociology. Rather, it would be more fruitful to develop the broader, interdisciplinary model already pioneered at Keele and later at Sussex. The aspiration was to incorporate the techniques and values of traditional disciplines while reaching out to touch on leading cultural, ethical and social developments in the contemporary world. The department's founding staff, led by the University's first professor of philosophy, designed a completely new degree structure to carry this aspiration forward.

The Seventies

The new course opened in 1973 with a small but closely-integrated group of staff and students. It incorporated several novel elements with links between courses in different disciplines, much stress on long assessment essays and - unusually for that time - the insistence that all final-year students should write a dissertation on an area chosen by them in collaboration with academic staff. From the beginning the department was particularly welcoming to mature students and, in a further effort to develop links with the outside world, the degree included a non-vocational sandwich year so that students coming straight to the course from school would have the opportunity to gain work experience in areas from voluntary agencies to private companies.

Throughout the Seventies the department grew until it had ten full-time staff, spread across the disciplines of English, philosophy, psychology and sociology, and an intake of around forty students a year. Towards the end of the decade a complete review of the syllabus and assessment system was undertaken. The resulting format, learning from and developing the best practice of the opening years, was to remain largely intact for the next decade.

The Eighties

The department was by now an established success: its intellectual standards were praised by external examiners and its students were able to combine enjoyment of their work with a good record in obtaining jobs and further courses after graduation. However, for the university world at large the 1980s was a difficult period. Cuts were universal and very real, so that IHS could consider it had survived very well despite losing its sandwich year and having its staff establishment reduced by two. In the midst of these difficulties the course continued to attract good applicants and a variety of research projects was undertaken by academic staff. At the end of the decade the opportunity came for the department to move to pleasant and self-contained premises near the main campus and the move was seen as expressing continued confidence in the future. For students it would offer an identifiable academic base with their own common room and cluster of computers for word-processing assignments.

The Nineties

The new decade saw a transition from a decade of cuts to one of rapid (though nationally under-funded) student expansion. Within a few years IHS had moved to an intake of ninety students per annum. Full-time staffing was allowed back up to earlier levels and a number of carefully-selected part-timers were employed but as throughout the universities of the country, even greater staff commitments and workloads were entailed. Despite the pressures on staff it was still felt that - particularly in areas like the final-year dissertation supervision - the interaction between staff and students and the capacity for student initiative remained hallmarks of IHS. That the department pioneered extensive use of computers in its office administration helped ensure that time for face-to-face communication with students was preserved where it most mattered.

A new challenge for staff was that - as with most other things in education - national league tables of research excellence were being established. First time round, in the early Nineties the department performed creditably with an above-average grade three rating (out of five). By great efforts on the part of academic staff this was pushed in the latest (1996) exercise up to grade four. Ultimately this achievement was relevant to students, not only in enhancing the prestige of their degrees and in attracting funding but also in offering the input of fresh research into undergraduate teaching.

The New Millennium

In October 2000 IHS achieved the ultimate accolade. It became the first academic department in the UK to be awarded a maximum of 24/24 in what is known as Subject Review. This is an external audit by the QAA of academic departments under the heading of different academic disciplines. As IHS is an interdisciplinary department it was visited under the rubric Philosophy, but all the provision was reviewed and found to be excellent.

In the wake of the Subject Review result, IHS has undertaken to update some of its provision. From the academic year 2001-2002, it will run a new introductory module in philosophy in year I which aims to cover some of the thinking of the greatest philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche. We are also working out the details of a new degree in conjunction with Biomedical Sciences, which will carry a philosophy component with emphasis on Philosophy of Science and Ethics. IHS staff also provide a philosophy module at the University's School of Management which looks at problems in Business Ethics.

In August 2002 IHS joined forces with Applied Social Studies to form a new Department of Social Sciences and Humanities. The IHS degree will continue as a Pathway within this new department.

Overall, then, we feel that our founding aims of a quarter of a century ago - to combine academic rigour and scholarship with interdisciplinary exploration and with outreach to the world around us - are still being successfully carried forward in the very difficult circumstances of a massively-expanded higher education system as we move forwards in the millennium. Our student numbers per annum have now returned back to 60, which means that we are able to retain a human scale while admitting students from a very wide range of backgrounds.

History by Dr. Ken Smith