Teaching and Learning Centre Case Studies

The MPA Online Pre-Arrival Course

The [LSE's Master of Public Administration (MPA)](#) is an interdisciplinary two-year degree covering the broad field of public policy and administration in a global context; the class is diverse (with students from all over the world), and, because the MPA is a professional degree, students enter with a range of real-world experiences.

It is not always easy to adapt to new academic endeavours, especially on programmes that draw individuals from a wide range of disciplines and nationalities. Dr Babken Babajanian, Associate Professorial Lecturer in the LSE Institute of Public Affairs (from September 2018, the LSE School of Public Policy), has designed a pre-arrival online course, in an effort to smooth the transition into the MPA, and to help the students better focus on their studies and feel more comfortable in their new learning environment

The MPA can be challenging for students to navigate through, both conceptually and practically. The programme reflects the multi-disciplinary nature of public policy, it offers six different policy streams (or concentrations), and combines theoretical and methodological tools with real-life policy application. Having worked with MPA students over the years, Dr

Babajanian (Bob) has learned a great deal about their learning and development needs and used this insider knowledge to tailor the course to the specific context of the programme.

The pre-arrival course is optional and provides knowledge and skills needed to maximise the prospects for success on the programme. It consists of two modules: (i) Introduction to Academic Writing, and (ii) Introduction to Public Policy. The 'Writing' module covers basic conventions and good practice principles used in two forms of written assessment at the MPA: (i) academic essay, and (ii) policy memo. It contains exercises based on examples from past assessed essays and policy memos written by MPA students. The 'Policy' module is designed to help students learn the definitions and disciplinary boundaries of public policy as well as to give them an idea about how the core MPA courses are related to public policy. The module asks students to review and absorb academic texts for answering a series of exercise questions. It offers short answers to check their understanding after they have attempted to generate their own responses. This is expected to develop the students' ability to effectively read and appreciate academic texts.

The course modules are self-guided and no teaching or facilitation is provided by the MPA programme team for the duration of the course. Participants are expected to monitor their own performance and understanding as they work through the material. There are, however, opportunities for feedback and reflection upon their arrival in London. Students have an opportunity to use the knowledge they learned in particular by applying their academic writing skills to a practice essay at the beginning of their first year. In addition to providing individual feedback, the team collaborated with Michael Beaney from the LSE Language Centre who offered group feedback and guidance to help students address common difficulties they encountered in writing the essay. In addition, Bob convened a group session to discuss the policy memos from the pre-arrival course. It served as a forum for students to share their views and give feedback in preparation for their policy memo assessments in MT 2017.

The MPA first offered the pre-arrival course in summer 2016, after which it was evaluated and revised for summer 2017 reflecting student feedback from the first pilot trial. In particular, the revised course was much more closely aligned with the MPA curriculum to ensure that it has immediate, practical relevance. This year's take-up was very good, with more than half of first year students (52 of 86) attempting at least one exercise. Student feedback is overwhelmingly positive and students report that the course is useful and relevant.

The course is a collaborative effort. In designing the writing module, Bob worked with Gemma Stansfield, a learning developer in LSE LIFE. Gemma specialises in academic writing and the pre-arrival course has greatly benefited from her expertise and insight. Darren Moon and Aggie Molnar from Learning Technology and Innovation (LTI) also gave Bob helpful advice and transferred the course onto the Moodle software platform.

A combination of factors hold the secret to the success of the course – access, pitch and support. These aspects make for a student-centred approach to learning, which starts to build a sense of academic community before students even set foot on campus Initiatives such as the MPA Online Pre-Arrival Course show just what can be done to support the learning of the international student cohort at the LSE.

If you're interested in creating similar provision, do get in touch with your TLC departmental adviser. You may also want to apply for funding through the Teaching and Learning Development Fund.