towards a core curriculum in EU studies

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Undergraduate and graduate programmes in European Union studies have become increasingly important over the last decade, not only in political science but also in other disciplines. In addition, the EU has become a key topic in conventional and traditional courses on comparative government and in courses on international affairs (Remacle, 2000). Thus, learning about the EU has become increasingly significant for university curricula – but also for preparation for the European jobmarket, and for the legitimacy and an overall understanding of the evolving EU political system.

Nevertheless, pedagogy on European integration remains highly disjointed, seated in various disciplines and educational schemes and addressing a range of uncoordinated foci. The possibility of synergies and mutual gains is thus still unrealised. To see if this situation can be remedied, we carried out a survey of the various approaches taken by universities and research institutes to the teaching of European issues. The aim of the research is to explore how these experiences might contribute to the establishment of a core curriculum of subjects and methods relevant to EU studies, and how resources might be shared among instructors to facilitate the teaching of these materials.

In the sections that follow, we first take a closer look at the European agenda on curriculum development and at the political and academic challenges associated with teaching the EU. We then draw some conclusions about what a good core curriculum might look like, and offer some suggestions on how teachers of EU studies might use the World Wide Web to co-operate and share teaching resources, and how Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) might facilitate teaching.

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POLITICAL CHALLENGES: THE NEED TO TEACH ABOUT THE EU

There are a number of reasons why young people in the EU generally, and not just future officials and policy makers, need to know how the EU functions. First of all, the political architecture of the European Union has gained salience for an ever-increasing number of public and private actors, and it shapes or influences decision-making in virtually all sectors of public policy in European countries. In turn, to ensure the legitimacy of European institutions, European citizens need to understand the evolving political order in Europe, where sovereignty and governance are no longer confined to the nation state.

In this context, the direct participation of civil society in European ‘events’ like the Convention on the future of the EU contributes to the dissemination of knowledge about the relevance of the EU. At the same time, however, effective participation requires a good grasp of the advantages and disadvantages of an expanding Europe. Finally, the EU’s important role in the international system cannot be underestimated either. Thus, linking international relations to EU studies seems to be especially rewarding for analysis of the overall relevance and impact of the EU.

A core curriculum in European Union studies should go beyond theoretical and academic topics. To prepare students for the European job market, it should also include a more technical, practical dimension that covers the institutions, political processes and skills necessary for careers in an international environment. In addition, given the ever-enlarging Union, university studies should be directed at facilitating mobility in the job market by reducing the ‘transaction costs’ of crossing disciplinary and/or national borders.

Furthermore, a core curriculum could reduce problems associated with obtaining official recognition for academic credentials acquired in different countries (on this subject see Rentrop, 2002). It might also encourage the introduction of cross-national postgraduate programmes and the general opening of national education systems to international programmes and exchange. Finally, once some of the fundamental elements of EU studies had been identified, relevant materials on them could easily be organised and made available as a teaching resource via the Internet.

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES: THE NEED FOR A FLEXIBLE CORE CURRICULUM

European Union studies cannot be contained by one academic discipline alone. As the EU is relevant to a wide range of political science sub-disciplines and other disciplines such as history, economics, law, sociology, and so on, experience and knowledge from these fields should also be drawn upon when teaching the EU. From our survey responses, it appears that most post-graduate programmes in EU studies involve a combination of disciplines including community law, history, economics, and politics. There was also broad agreement among our respondents that a strict separation of politics, law and economics (and sometimes history and sociology) is hardly feasible in EU studies, and would not allow for a complete picture of the European integration process. Even so, apart from a few established post-graduate modules, co-operation