Appendix 1: Focus group and student consultation report

1 Undergraduate student focus group

1.1 Format of the session

Undergraduate students were invited to attend a short focus group to discuss Politics in Spires and gather feedback to inform the future direction of some aspects of the Triton project. Four undergraduates attended, all of whom were studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at either 1st, 2nd or 3rd year level. The structure of the session was as follows:

1. Welcome - Participants were welcomed to the focus group and were encouraged to offer all comments, good and bad.
2. Online survey – Participants undertook a short online survey to collect data on the information sources they used, what they would most value about the site, how they keep informed of things in the department, and feedback on the categories. As the survey would be sent out to a wider audience we also requested feedback on the questions once the participants had completed it.
3. Usability tasks – Participants were asked to work through some simple tasks on politicsinspires.org and verbalise their answers so that they could be recorded and note takers could observe the experiences.
4. Discussion – Mock-ups of areas of the site were used to generate discussion (see *Appendix 2*). We were interested in their opinions on the design, structure, content etc.

1.2 Results from the survey

Key points from the survey results were:

- The students' use of journals and articles seems to mature as they move through their course, with one commenting that they only read articles cited by their tutor. Specific journals seem less relevant than specific articles.
- All participants read a newspaper online – The Guardian was the most popular ("I like the look of it" "it looks fun").
- All used online resources – news websites (BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera), iTunesU, podcasts, 350 online university courses.com, YouTube, think tanks.
- Only one respondent had heard of CC/OER.
- Key factors influencing their use of the site: **timeliness, global content, quality of materials** (these came up again and again in the discussions).
- They would most value: ability to engage with high profile academics, to hear podcasts specifically related to my course, to hear podcasts from a wider range of political topics, to hear research talks.
- When asked what else they would like to add to the site: **podcasts and videos**, **politics of countries other than UK**, departmental/university political events, events calendar with key politics talks and conferences (Intelligence Squared, RSA, ODI, Oxford, Cambridge, Chatham House etc.).

1.3 General discussion following the survey

- If links to journal articles were to be presented it would be desirable to search by topic and see a brief summary in the results.
- Recommendations would be useful, tag them 'interesting to people studying xxx'. This could be done by Researchers not necessarily academics.
- Rarely directed to recent articles by tutor (usually the classic article on xxx) so having a way to see these easily would be good.
- All were unclear what RSS feeds were. One said she had tried to do it once but it was too confusing.
- Several mentioned visiting think tank sites, e.g. European Council on Foreign Relations (www.ecfr.eu). They have podcasts and a good blog. They liked the design of this too.
- Another website mentioned was http://www.booksandideas.net/ which is a French site.
- They unanimously said that they do not follow political party websites, they are full of propaganda and not of interest.
- The best periodicals to follow are The Economist, New Statesman, New Internationalist. A table of contents would be useful.
- When asked about newspapers they said they probably have a newspaper of choice which they follow online. Many liked the design of the Guardian online – they liked the colours, pictures and it felt fun.
- One commented that she has 12 news apps on her mobile phone.

1.4 Usability tasks

Each participant worked through some simple tasks when using politicsinspires.org and offered feedback. A note-taker shadowed each participant and the sessions were also recorded.

Participant A feedback

Design

Search box should be in top corner.

Would be good to have a short description of what the article is about in search results.

Don't like home page, don't like top bar with logo, too cluttered. Needs to just have tabs and search box. Needs to be clean. Logo needs to be more professional.

Ox/Cambs logos give it respectability. Presume someone has filtered content to some extent. Probably assume contributors are at least graduate students.

Post summaries should be shorter on home page. Have a recent posts section to the left, very brief.

I don't like scrolling.

I'd like to see a map of the content on the page – otherwise I feel like I'm missing something. So could have Months with a list of posts. It's really hard to find the post from September in current design.

I never use side bars – I always ignore them.

I like the font – gives intellectual and authentic feel.

Referred to a friend at Cambridge's blog site on the middle east (she's studying Arabic). Liked the design of this, no home page so that means one click less, articles, categories are clear. Some links to videos etc. but mostly text.

Simplify the website, have articles listed chronologically or by theme, at end of each article have reading list, 'blockbuster lectures', need glamorous lectures – need to get things to the status of Harvard.

Categories

Don't like categories – clogs page up.
Need to know categories before reading it.

Content
Good length of articles, max 1500-2000 words. I always check how long something is before I read it – if it's too long I won't bother.
Participant recognised a name immediately on the contributors list.
Contributors need more profile – photos, website links, tiny bio etc. The people are very strong (academics).
Need more content.
Would like some links at the end of posts with perhaps a bibliography.
Open Learning section is not very clear – what's it for? Intro to Globalisation – would expect to see more blue links in the article

General comments
I love the podcasts website – it's brilliant, I use it a lot. My friends told me about iTunesU. I use the Millican lectures.
Open Culture(?) website – I like this and visit it often.
I love the Harvard Justice lectures – very professional, almost 'celebrity' status – increases profile of institution. Millican should have the same type of hype – he's just as exciting.
Good names: Millican, Bognador, Ware/Wear, Liz Fraser, Singh (brilliant lecturer)

Participant B feedback
General Comments
Not much on website – would look at it more if there was more content
Trying to do too many things? Is it a blog or an aggregator?
Is it a tool or something in its own right?
Link to OpenLearn not signposted on homepage – wouldn't get there
Academic validation important – want some sort of sifting process from researchers/academics
Overall presentation – too many words and lists – prefer sites like TED, also www.ecfr.eu
Interested in podcasts but has difficulty locating them on the web (also liked www.academicearth.org)

XPert widget
Didn't know what it was, link went outside the site to a Leicester teaching resource – not relevant or interesting
Would prefer more limited resources that are relevant such as TED videos
Don't mind clicking outside of the blog if the information is relevant

Author information
Found it frustrating that author information is not readily available.
Wants to know who is providing each resource, what their background it, what else they have done.
Level of expertise not as important (no difficulties with PHD students writing) but want to know who they are.
Tags/Categories
Confusion between tags and categories
Tags too vague (acknowledged they might be better with more articles)

Level of Information
About right for areas that she does not know about
For areas of personal interest may be too easy (but might prefer to go to journals anyway)
Felt that the interview section could be more advanced – thought "Introduction to Globalisation" was not the right title and that the opportunity should be taken with an expert to allow her to say something more significant (personal note – this might make the site appeal to other academics more rather than just students)

Participant C feedback

Design
Not well designed, text looks dumped, nothing different to other blogs.
Search box is too indistinct.
Could not search by date – has to scroll through all posts.
Need contributor on all posts, not just the most recent. Need much more info on contributors, hyperlink to more info and a photo? (need department profile, list of other materials)
Did not like right hand column too long and thin, redesign.
If providing a summary, give an allowed length rather than cut off (did not like [....]).
Like the design of the podcasts list, but searching caused confusion.

Categories/tags
Tags could get out of control – need to shorten and 'click for more'.
Category is not identified on the blog post.

Content
Need much more content – needs to be very frequent updates, lots of traffic.
Current topics – disappointed to not see anything on Libya for example.
Did not understand Xpert search.
Finding resources from other Universities is important.
Intro to Globalisation – did not like the design of this. Need frames, coloured boxes.
Content needs and intro before going into interview.
Podcasts would interest me

Participant D feedback

Design
University branding was a turn-off, wanted to use this site in 'relaxation time' not see it as study/work.
Didn't immediately use search box for some things – perhaps it is not prominent enough?
Wanted to see a list of months to find stuff by date
Wanted author name to be more prominent and to make it more obvious that you could click on it, wanted far more info on author (photo, biog, areas of interest to determine their level etc. – helps to assess value/bias of the person).
Searching Oxford podcasts – a bit unclear what to do, didn't know if she could clear politics from the search box, pressed reset button rather than Go. Really liked seeing the list though and it was good stuff. Could easily assess from this information if I want to listen to it or watch it.

1.5 Discussion section

Early mock-ups for the learning pathways and dynamic collections were distributed and a very active discussion took place about the site. A summary of the points is given here.

- This website is excellent: www.academicearth.org , all loved the content and the design. Not much on there but it's great: Harvard, Yale, MIT etc.
- All participants really like using videos and podcasts and would want these on an area of politicsinspires.org.
- TED is also brilliant http://www.ted.com/ all said the design was great and the material is added to all the time but it's not overwhelming.
- Oxford lectures are difficult to find, needs to be easier.
- Topic and title is most important but not so much the author. Although they would not trust a student as much as an academic.
- They like a 'magazine' design (TED, Guardian, academicearth).
- Design and tabs should be much simpler – why is the comments policy on a tab and not at the bottom of the page? Should be Home/About/Contributors/Content (or Themes).
- Good things are hidden in Open Learning – don't know what this is.
- Ox/Cambs logos give validation but would expect contributions to be from just Ox/Cambs, also expect that someone has quality controlled the content on the site. One person was put off by the logos being so prominent.
- Need content to be posted very regularly.
- Important to have high quality as the first impression, "make lectures glamorous".
- Categories and tags should not be so visible – confusing.

When discussing the Learning Pathway concepts the following points were raised:
- Having a place to go for introductory material would be useful when starting a new topic.
- Needs to be global/international material, needs to be filtered and labelled 'here are five things that are useful'.

- More 'academic' material ('dull') was valid but perhaps it should be less easy to find.

Key issues raised during this session

Throughout the session several key issues were raised repeatedly:

- Need to make it clear what politicsinspires.org is for (blog/aggregator??).
- The design needs to be improved to make it more appealing.
- Recommendations/validation/quality is very important and <u>assumed</u> if the Ox/Cambs logo are present.
- Filtering is important – fewer, high quality results better than lots of noise.
- More frequent content required on current issues.
- International coverage is very important – they are very outward looking.
- Contributor profiles are essential – helps the user asses value.
- More links are required within posts/articles.
- Podcasts and videos are very desirable.
- Title and a brief description are essential criteria (e.g. in dynamic content). The Xpert feed confused them, needs to be much more explicit.
- Categories and tags confused them – too dominant.
- It needs to be easy and fun to use.

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2. Student consultation session

A separate consultation session was scheduled with graduate students. At this level (in this case MPhil and DPhil) the participants were more likely to be contributors to the blog rather than merely receivers of the information published on the site. The session was an open discussion and some of the comments included:

"The new design looks great, an improvement, easy to navigate" DPhil Student

"it looks beautiful and very official" MPhil Student

"if you want students to come regularly to this there needs to be more on there for them to visit" DPhil Student

"I feel that it is empowering and exciting that I have been given a voice as an official member of the University to post things" MPhil Student

"it's a really good access point to all the research people are doing" DPhil Student

"it offers people to voice their views on various things, not all people get the chance to write for a magazine" DPhil Student

"I absolutely love writing but I don't really have that much time to commit to it so I really like that this is an outlet that I can provide commentary" MPhil Student

"we are Oxford and Cambridge and that's our competitive advantage" DPhil Student

"these are the thoughts of the World's most eminent academics … that's what's going to draw most people to the site" DPhil Student