

Louvain-la-Neuve & Oldenburg, 10 February 2010

To the attention of: all participants of the 4th ECPR Summer School in Methods and Techniques, Ljubljana, July/August 2009.

Memo on main results of the evaluation survey – and improvements for 2010

Dear 2009 Summer School participant,

As promised, we are sending you a summary of the main results of the online evaluation survey¹ which was conducted towards the end of the SSMT, complemented by a focus group we conducted with a dozen participants during the SSMT (many thanks to this group in particular!). We also inform you, considering some of the main critiques and suggestions by participants, of some improvements we will do our best to achieve for the 5th SSMT in 2010.

1. Main courses

We received a detailed quantitative and qualitative feedback on each one of the 12 main courses. This was sent to each one of the instructors, along with some additional comments of ours. Some main trends:

- Altogether, 11 of the 12 courses received an overall “good” (“4” score) or “excellent” (“5” score) evaluation (including some newly offered courses), whereas 1 course received a more negative evaluation and will need to be re-formatted.
- More specific items: on average (considering all 12 courses), the best rated items were: the openness of the instructors to the participants’ questions and the stimulation of the participants’ interest (above 4). Most other items were rated favourably (between 3.5 & 4). A particular item received a more mixed evaluation (improvements needed): the articulation between lecture hours and lab work.
- Overall: as in 2008, participants considered that, generally, they enjoyed their course and that their course was useful for them. On “*the course fully met my expectations*” item, the scores were better than in 2008. A large majority of participants would recommend their course to some of their friend and colleagues – altogether, this is a pretty good evaluation.

Improvements for 2009 : considering each course separately, we have decided to make changes on some course topics, re-arrange the course programme, and make some specific suggestions to instructors (also considering the very informative qualitative feedback given by the participants). We shall definitively continue to encourage an interactive style of teaching. We shall also pursue our policy of ensuring a sufficient number of qualified TAs per course. The offer of 2-week courses will also be significantly expanded (see next point).

2. One-week courses

We also received a detailed quantitative and qualitative feedback on each one of the 7 one-week courses. This detailed feedback was sent to each one of the instructors, along with some additional comments of ours. Some main trends:

¹ Survey conducted under the technical supervision of Dr. Bojana Lobe, University of Ljubljana.

- Altogether, the course-by-course evaluation was quite favourable to very good (on most items: “good” or “very good”); none of the 7 courses received a negative evaluation overall;
- However, in the qualitative comments, many participants found that the 1-week format was sometimes frustrating as it did not give enough time to work more in-depth; in addition, it proved difficult for many participants to find the right combination between the week 1 and week 2 one-week courses; finally, many participants felt they missed part of the SSMT activities (in particular the “Monday Mix”).

Improvements for 2010 : After a thorough evaluation, also considering organizational issues, and in spite of the good course-by-course evaluations, we have decided to discontinue the 1-week courses format. Instead, we shall significantly expand the 2-week course offer. In particular, we shall combine two successful 1-week topics into new coherent 2-week courses.

3. Refresher courses

We also sent a detailed feedback to each one of the instructors of the 3 refresher courses, along with some comments of ours. One course was rated very positively, another one received satisfactory evaluations, while the third course got more mixed or negative reviews.

Improvements for 2010 : As for the main courses, we will try to improve the early availability of the course material (prior to the course) and to provide more detailed information on what participants will get (and what they won’t get) in each refresher course. In 2010, we will offer a broader array of refresher courses (including more ‘conceptual’ ones), with a clearer focus in each one of them, and with clearer indications in terms of connections with the main courses (prerequisites).

4. Plenary programme

In 2009, we tried to concentrate the plenary programme on items which were more favourably evaluated by the participants in 2008.

In general, the “Monday mix” was still highly appreciated; it was found enjoyable and useful by most participants (with some suggestions for improvements). It was also very well attended, even more than in 2008). Besides the “Monday mix”, the best rated items were the two parallel “Defence” sessions, especially because some participants themselves could have a word and make a presentation of their own. The other events received a satisfactory or mixed evaluation. Altogether participants expressed a clear preference for more “bottom-up” ways to interact and cross-fertilize.

Improvements for 2010 : we shall keep the “Monday mix” and improve its scheduling, and beyond this, offer a smaller amount of plenary events, with a core focus on “bottom-up” and more participant-driven ways to cross-fertilize. We shall probably² maintain 1 or 2 roundtables, rather around more “practical tips” topics. Beyond this, we plan to replace the “Defence” by an even more interactive session (posters’ session linked with a reception). We also plan to develop further online tools (through Claroline, in particular) so that participants themselves can network and set up their own initiatives, bottom-up.

5. Practical and organizational aspects :

Altogether, we have been able to consolidate the organization of the SSMT, with high levels of participants’ satisfaction on most items – in spite of the fact that the SSMT has more than doubled in size in 4 years (from 155 to 325 participants). Overall, the application, payment and registration procedures were well-rated. The participants were also very satisfied with regards to the logistics and

² As we write, the plenary programme for 2010 is not yet finalized.

infrastructure, but still a bit less so with the printing & copying procedures. The use of the “Claroline” web interface for the courses was rated more favourably than in 2008. There were still some critiques, but rather more linked to some specific courses (using Claroline in a less systematic way, or delivering the information, readings etc. too late). One particular point received a more negative evaluation, the access to internet (Wi-Fi) on campus.

With regards to on-campus accommodation (Dijaski Dom), the overall evaluation was overall medium. We noticed an improvement in the evaluation of some items (e.g. cooking facilities, laundry), thanks to the local efforts to improve these as compared to 2008. A significant minority of participants, however, found this accommodation too basic. By contrast, most participants lodging in other locations (private arrangements) were satisfied.

The social programme and non-academic activities were, altogether, rated very positively, as well as the overall atmosphere of the summer school, the overall interaction between the participants, and the interaction with instructors and teaching assistants. Thus: the ‘SSMT atmosphere’ continues to be a success, even more so than in 2008.

As to the cost items, there is quite a lot of diversity in the evaluation: some participants find the SSMT quite expensive altogether, whereas some others find it quite affordable – on average, this yields a medium score. Some items are perceived as more expensive (in particular the tuition fee, accommodation and laundry facility) and others as quite affordable (academic costs, food and travel).

Improvements for 2010:

We are examining with great care each of the items which were ranked “average” or “below average” (only few points remaining after 4 years’ experience) and, together with the local organizing team and the ECPR Central Services, are trying to figure out the best possible practical solutions for 2010. We shall definitively further expand and consolidate the “Claroline” environment, and work with the local organizers to ensure smoother internet (Wi-Fi) access. On the social programme side, we shall maintain the welcome reception/barbecue, a 2009 innovation which was well-appreciated.

With regards to accommodation, we shall communicate well in advance all the advantages and limitations of the on-campus offer (Dijaski Dom), and make it easier for participants seeking other off-campus arrangements. The owner of Dijaski Dom has made a firm commitment to improve Wi-Fi connections before the summer of 2010.

On the financial side: we have only very limited room for manoeuvre, because there are obvious fixed costs in such an enterprise. Be ensured that we do our best to get you the best “value for money”. You should also know that the SSMT does not make a profit – the goal is to break even financially. For 2010 (and also for 2011 hopefully), in spite of an increase in some cost items, we are committed to maintaining the 2009 tuition fee unchanged for participants from ECPR-member institutions.

5. In conclusion

All in all, we are glad to see that the overall evaluation is positive or very positive on many items – in particular, the scoring on many practical and organizational aspects has improved consistently from 2008 to 2009 (it already was the case between 2007 and 2008). This shows that our hard teamwork is paying off, and that this is appreciated by you. Naturally, there is still room for improvements – we are learning every year. Your evaluations show that the ECPR SSMT is building up its status as a place for excellence in methodological training. We are also glad to notice that a particular, interactive, informal, enjoyable atmosphere is developing at the SSMT – this is by no means contradictory with hard work and state-of-the-art training. Be ensured that we’re doing our best to further improve the quality of the SSMT, both from an academic and organizational perspective.

Thank you again if you have filled in the evaluation questionnaire (only about 50% of you did in 2009, as compared to 80% in 2008; in 2010 we will ensure a higher response rate). This is an extremely important tool for us to further improve the SSMT, in 2010 and beyond. If you have any further query or feedback on this evaluation memo, please send a message to Benoît Rihoux (see mail below).

If you are still interested (and if it still possible for you) to follow some methods training in the summer of 2010, we hope you will find some interesting topics in our 2010 course offer. In that case, we will be glad to meet you again in Ljubljana. If not, anyway, we wish you full success in your projects and hope that your 2009 experience has been fruitful, academically as well as personally.

Best regards, also on behalf of the ECPR Central Services, as well as of the Local Academic Coordinator, the Local Academic Organizer and their team at the University of Ljubljana,

Profs. Bernhard Kittel and Benoît Rihoux, Academic convenors

bernhard.kittel@uni-oldenburg.de, benoit.rihoux@uclouvain.be