

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
SCHOOL OF DIVINITY, HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW
SUMMARY REPORT

Panel Visit: Tuesday 29 and Wednesday 30 March 2016

Overall Impressions

The School of Divinity, History and Philosophy is based within the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) and located within College Bounds, King's College.

The Panel wished to thank all members of staff within the School for the work that had gone into producing the very comprehensive Internal Teaching Review documentation, and for their commitment to the review process. The Panel also wished to thank all students and staff who participated in the visit, and who had provided open, honest and helpful feedback.

Overall, the Panel **commended** the quality of teaching and learning in the School. The Panel was heartened by the positive response from students toward the School and **commended** the existence of a keen sense of collegiality and a common goal amongst all staff in respect of the pursuit of a high standard of student experience.

The Panel **commended** the willingness and commitment of staff to continue to supply high quality teaching and support in a challenging financial environment, and was encouraged to note this commitment was recognised by all undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students interviewed. The Panel noted a number of instances of good practice, recognition of which is implicit in the main body of the report. Students clearly identified with their Disciplines, and empathised with staff regarding the staffing levels within the School, and were prepared to agitate on their behalf. The Panel was concerned however that this might impact upon students' study and recommended that the School does what it can to counter any misinformation being communicated.

The Panel did note that while disciplines within the School had introduced some excellent examples of good practice, in terms of both subject delivery and assessment, these are not systematic or well developed across the School despite proving successful. The Panel **recommended** that the School work to roll out instances of good practice more widely.

Notes: The numbering of sections below reflects the numbering of the self-evaluation document (SED). Some sections of the SED attracted no commendations or recommendations.

COMMENDATIONS

Section 1: Range of Provision

- 1.2 The Panel **commended** the School on developing and delivering new and innovative programmes in response to difficult times.

Section 3: Staffing

- 3.2 The Panel **commended** the School for its continued delivery of quality teaching by staff members at all levels of seniority.
- 3.3 The Panel **commended** the School on the collegiality of its staffing team and of the Head of School in particular for fostering such an environment
- 3.7 The Panel **commended** the efficiency and dedication of the School's administrative staff.

Section 4: School Organisation

- 4.4. The Panel **commended** the School on the level of involvement of administrative staff in School meetings. The 'buddy system' that is employed by the administrative staff, whereby each staff member has an allocated second for coverage, is also an excellent undertaking and is to be **commended**.

Section 5: Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval

- 5.3 The Panel was impressed with the **commendable** breadth of courses offered across the School.
- 5.4 The Panel **commended** the School on the development of the distance learning postgraduate research programme.

Section 6: Teaching, Learning and Assessment

- 6.1 The Panel **commended** the School, and the Philosophy discipline in particular, for posting YouTube videos to introduce their courses. The Panel further **commended** the staff for the information sessions made available to potential Honours students for guidance in considering their Honours options and early course selection.
- 6.5 The Panel **commended** the School, and the Philosophy discipline in particular, for trialling time-limited lecture recordings.
- 6.6 The Panel **commended** academic staff for encouraging participation and engagement in small group teaching.
- 6.12 The Panel **commended** the History discipline for the time-consuming but nevertheless very valuable practice of face to face feedback on essays.
- 6.13 The Panel also **commended** the School on the role their Executive Assistant has played in bringing consistency to administrative assessment practices between disciplines.
- 6.16 The Panel **commended** the academic staff across all disciplines for their innovation in small group teaching and for their endeavours toward fostering reflective thinkers and speakers in their student body.

Section 7: Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

- 7.1 The Panel **commended** staff who have instituted in class written questionnaires to supplement SCEF returns.
- 7.2 The Panel **commended** staff for the excellent relationship they have with their students and their willingness to operate an “open door” culture.

Section 9: Training and Supervision of Research Students

- 9.2 The Panel was very impressed with the high standard of support that is provided to Distance Learning PGR students and **commended** the School on maintaining such high levels of support to a very unique cohort.
- 9.5 The Panel **commended** the Divinity discipline for offering, on a voluntary basis, extra German language training.
- 9.7 The Panel **commended** the School for the high level of satisfaction with supervision as expressed by the PhD student representatives, particularly the Distance Learning PhD students

Section 10: Personal Development and Employability

- 10.1 The Panel noted the work of the Student Retention and Employability Group and **commended** the School for the development of this group.
- 10.2 The Panel **commended** the School for appointing an Intern during the summer of 2015 to further links with alumni.
- 10.3 The Panel **commended** the School for a variety of innovations in developing employability attributes of its students.

Section 12: Staff Training and Educational Development

- 12.6 The Panel **commended** the School for its ambitious target of all teaching staff being Fellows of the Higher Education Academy by 2020.

Section 13: Student Involvement in Quality Processes

- 13.2 The Panel noted from the SED that the School posts minutes from SSLC meetings to MyAberdeen. The Panel **commended** the School on this initiative.
- 13.7 The Panel noted from the SED that the School holds 4 places on its overarching Teaching and Learning Committee for undergraduate students; the Panel **commended** the School for such practice.

Section 15a: Student Support, Retention and Progression

- 15.1 The Panel **commended** the School's overall commitment to student support, as demonstrated by the "open door" culture exercised by all staff.
- 15.3 The Panel **commended** the School for the staff-led Philosophy in Education initiative with local Schools.

Section 15b: Student Support, Retention and Progression

- 15b.c The Panel **commended** staff members for being prepared to rearrange meeting locations to obviate any disability-related access problems on a case-by-case basis.

Section 16: Recruitment, Access and Widening Participation

- 16.3 The Panel **commended** the School for its involvement with the Royal Institute of Philosophy in addition to its Philosophy in Education initiative.
- 16.4 The Panel **commended** the School for engaging with the Access to Degree Studies programme and the Widening Participation Summer School.

Section 17: QAA Quality Enhancement Engagements

- 17.1 The Panel **commended** the School for its engagement with the QAA National Enhancement Themes.

Section 19: Quality Enhancement and Good Practice

- 19.2 The Panel **commended** all examples of good practice identified by the School in section 19 of the SED.

Section 20: Impediments to Quality Enhancement

- 20.3 The Panel **commended** the School for the dedicated and innovative manner in which it is coping with the challenge of decreasing staff numbers.

Section 21: Issues for Discussion with External Subject Specialist

- 21.1 The Panel **commended** the School for making field trips voluntary rather than compulsory for students in today's financial climate.

Section 22: Other Issues

- 22.1 The Panel felt that the School was to be **commended** for its efforts to date in relation to the retention of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 1: Range of Provision

- 1.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School, in the spirit of efficiency gains, and in the light of current staffing levels, undertake a review of its undergraduate provision.

Section 3: Staffing

- 3.4 The Panel **recommended** that the School do all it can to protect students from staffing level concerns, and potential misinformation, so that the students can focus on their studies.
- 3.5 The Panel **recommended** that the gender imbalance amongst teaching staff within the School be considered as part of School Athena Swan discussions.
- 3.7 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to appoint another non-academic staff member to ensure the administrative team is able to continue its high levels of support.
- 3.8 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to appoint a Moral Philosophy specialist to Philosophy as soon as practicable.

Section 4: School Organisation

- 4.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to review how efficiently the separate discipline committees were feeding into the School Teaching Committee.
- 4.2 The Panel **recommended** the School look at the fora available for additional, formal communication of good practice within and across disciplines.
- 4.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the practice of having its External Examiners being involved in mitigating circumstances meetings.

Section 5: Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval

- 5.3 The Panel **recommended** that forward planning of teaching be as strategic and thorough as possible, including consideration of some degree of rationalisation of courses whilst still ensuring a suitable availability of choice; it further **recommended** that there is detailed communication to students of course opportunities available to them over their two honours years. The Panel also **recommended** that the School think carefully about offering courses when staff with particular interests and competencies leave and are not replaced.

Section 6: Teaching, Learning and Assessment

- 6.1 The Panel **recommended** that the Philosophy discipline's practice of posting YouTube videos to introduce its courses be rolled out more widely across all disciplines.

- 6.4 The Panel **recommended** that the difficulties some students had experienced with MyCurriculum should be fed back to senior management.
- 6.5 The Panel **recommended** that time-limited lecture recordings, as trialled in Philosophy courses, be rolled out more widely if deemed successful. The Panel also **recommended** that the School investigate other ways in which to make use of recorded lectures, so as to mitigate poor attendance by students.
- 6.6 The Panel **recommended** that assessment rationales in regard to small group activities be made clearer to students in endeavours which are not formally assessed.
- 6.7 The Panel **recommended** that the School review policy in regard to the assessment (or not) of tutorial participation and ensure that the requirements are communicated clearly to students.
- 6.8 The Panel **recommended** that the School offer more formative assessment activities for the next academic year.
- 6.9 The Panel **recommended** that disciplines seek to ensure consistency in regard to the quality and timeliness of feedback on assessment to improve the overall standard of feedback being returned to students.
- 6.10 The Panel **recommended** that the School endeavour to iron out inconsistencies regarding policy in respect of late submission of continuous assessment.
- 6.11 The Panel **recommended** that explanation of the rationale for, and explicit guidance on the requirements of, differing types of assessment should be available when first introduced.
- 6.14 The Panel **recommended** that the School ensure all students know who had marked their work.
- 6.15 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the assessment in History courses and the History programme as a whole, ensuring they are comparable, within the History degree and also within the School, both in terms of numbers of assessments per course and the amount of effort required to complete. Further, the Panel **recommended** that making some of the summative assessments more formative in nature would lessen the pressure of apparent over-assessment whilst addressing the student requests noted in 6.8.
- 6.17 The Panel **recommended** that the School look into the opportunities Turnitin can provide for anonymous marking at its earliest convenience.

Section 7: Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

- 7.1 The Panel **recommended** that in class written questionnaires be used more widely throughout the School to supplement SCEF, and to gather early evidence of student satisfaction (or otherwise). The School should also consider other methods to ensure that SCEF are completed such as keeping aside some time at the end of a lecture and asking the cohort to complete the SCEF on their mobile devices. The School could also benefit from doing more to educate students in the value the staff place on student feedback; the Panel suggests a “you said, we did” style feedback format.

- 7.4 The Panel **recommended** that the concerns of *some* students in regard to Enhanced Study and requiring staff support in choosing curricula, be fed-back to senior management.

Section 9: Training and Supervision of Research Students

- 9.4 The Panel **recommended** that the School ensure PGR students have two supervisors as much as is practicable within the current climate.
- 9.6 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to ensure that feedback to students following their first year reviews was timelier.

Section 12: Staff Training and Educational Development

- 12.3 The Panel **recommended** that a more rigorous and structured procedure is put in place for new staff mentoring, and that the School enter discussions with CAD regarding any perceived deficiencies and/or issues in institutional training.
- 12.4 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to promote, encourage, and roll out Peer Review across the School more widely.
- 12.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to implement a formal structure for the discussion and dissemination of good practice for the purposes of staff training and development.
- 12.6 The Panel **recommended** the School ensure all staff are fully apprised of the target that all teaching staff become Fellows of the Higher Education Academy by 2020.

Section 13: Student Involvement in Quality Processes

- 13.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School use student representatives within School Athena Swan fora.

Section 15a: Student Support, Retention and Progression

- 15.2 The Panel **recommended** that the Student Retention and Employability Group seeks to engage with institutional Retention (and Positive Outcomes) Task Force.

Section 15b: Student Support, Retention and Progression

- 15b.2 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to appoint a designated Disability Officer at the earliest opportunity.

Section 16: Recruitment, Access and Widening Participation

- 16.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School consider whether the Philosophy in Education initiative could be expanded to nearby low progression target schools.

Section 18: Recent Developments

- 18.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to implement a formal structure for the discussion and dissemination of good practice.

Section 20: Impediments to Quality Enhancement

- 20.2 The Panel noted the awkwardness of the School being across multiple buildings and **recommended** that the School continue to liaise with Estates regarding the environment, aesthetic and disability access.

Section 21: Issues for Discussion with External Subject Specialist

- 21.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School continue to investigate alternative sources of finance to support students to participate in field trips. It also **recommended** the School explore alternative resources that could be used in place of fieldwork for those students who cannot financially afford to go, so that they have a learning experience that is comparable to that experienced by those students who are able to attend the field course.
- 21.2 The Panel **recommended** that the School, and particularly the History discipline, seek more consistency in assessment practices where practicable.
- 21.3 The Panel **recommended** that the UGPC look at the assessment of History for the programmes as a whole and not just with respect to individual courses. The Panel also **recommended** that the perceived burden of over assessment might be helped by making some of the current assessment formative rather than summative.

Section 22: Other Issues

- 22.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School remain vigilant and proactive in seeking to decrease the rate of non-continuation within the School.