University of Aberdeen Internal Teaching Review (ITR)

SCHOOL OF DIVINITY, HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND ART HISTORY

Virtual Panel Visit: 4-6th May 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Internal Teaching Review (ITR) of the School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History was undertaken in line with the University's published process and procedures.

1.1   The School was asked to submit a streamlined Critical Analysis (CA) document which addressed the following key areas:

(i)   School context: to include student numbers, demographics and outcomes; highlight any areas of teaching and learning practices that are specific to the School and a summary of the School's response to the previous ITR.

(ii)   Positive aspects of the School's teaching and learning: to include examples of positive practice and particular strengths of the School as well as how this good practice is shared both within the School and beyond.

(iii)   Challenges that have been encountered in the School's teaching and learning provision: to include potential areas identified for improvement and an action plan for how they might be addressed – or whether these were issues for discussion at the ITR. It was advised that this section was not only focused on response to the COVID- 19 pandemic.

(iv)   Future plans: to include areas for development in the next few years, e.g., new course/programme developments and proposed partnerships if any.

1.2   The ITR Panel was comprised of:

Professor Michelle Pinard	Chair of the Review, School of Biological Sciences, Quality Assurance Committee (QAC)
Dr Stuart Durkin	School of Social Science, Employability and Entrepreneurship Committee (EEC)
Dr Isla Callander	School of Law, Quality Assurance Committee (QAC)
Mr Ondrej Kucerak	Vice-President for Education, Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA)
Professor Graeme Morton	External Subject Specialist (History), University of Dundee
Dr Alistair Rider	External Subject Specialist (Art History), University of St. Andrews
Dr James Wilson	External Subject Specialist (Philosophy), University College London
Dr T.J. Lang	External Subject Specialist (Divinity), University of St. Andrews
Miss Kyra Lamont	Clerk, Academic Services

1.3 The Panel considered the documentation provided by the School, by way of an evidence-based CA as detailed in 1.1 above. In addition, prior to a virtual visit to the School, internal members of the Panel were provided with access to the School's Quality Assurance (QA) repository, containing the School's annual monitoring materials (Annual Course and Annual Programme Reviews (ACR and APR)) in addition to Course Feedback Forms, Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) minutes, External Examiner Reports (EERs), and minutes pertaining to various School Committees. External panel members were provided with a sample of the documentation. Consideration of this documentation, along with the School's submitted CA, enabled the Panel to identify key themes for further exploration.

1.4 The Panel conducted a virtual visit to the School via Microsoft Teams. Across the review, the panel met with a range of academic, management and support staff, as well as undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. This provided valuable insight into the School's pedagogic provision as well as how the School interacts with the wider University.

1.5 The themes for focused discussion agreed with the School prior to and during the visit were:

(i) **Employability, Student Experience and Support** – including the ways in which the School supports its students, enhances their overall experience, and improves their employability prospects;

(ii) **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion** – including how the School is striving to create an inclusive environment, ensure equality, and celebrate the diversity of staff and students;

(iii) **Teaching Practices, Assessment & Delivery (Blended Learning**) - specifically the ways in which the pandemic impacted the delivery of teaching, including any changes to assessment, and practices which will be retained going forward;

(iv) **Programme Development and Management** – including the ways in which academic programmes and staff workloads are managed.

1.6 This report is split into three sections:

(i) **Part A** gives the overall impressions of the teaching provision within the School, formed from the whole ITR process;

(ii) **Part B** covers the outcome of various meetings held throughout the review, focusing on a small number of themes as outlined above. It also details the Pedagogic Partnership Session, which involved more free-form discussion; and

(iii) **Part C** details the School action plan which will form the basis of the annual follow- up reports on actions highlighted here.

PART A: OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

2.1 Overall, the Panel was impressed with the provision and quality of teaching provided by the School. The Panel noted this as particularly worthy of praise given the significant challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The panel commended the School for its strong culture of care with regards to its students and its aim to provide all students with an excellent student experience and quality of teaching.

2.2 Staff reported well defined roles and the Panel commended the excellent level of communication between the administration team, academics, personal tutors, and other support staff. The Panel were pleased to note feedback that the School operates as a cohesive unit, despite being spread across a variety of buildings, and enjoys a good sense of community overall.

2.3   The Panel found the strategy for sustaining the large community of postgraduate students to be innovative. It was explained by a member of Academic Staff that the additional hours associated with the supervision of postgraduate students could be offset by the employment of Research Associates; and that fee income from approximately 2.4 international PhD students could pay for one post-doctoral position within the School. The Panel thought that this was an interesting approach for a School with a particularly large Postgraduate Research (PGR) intake.

2.4   Whilst the Panel heard about some excellent examples of innovation in terms of community building, such as the "Phila-bobbin" and "Being Divine", they noted that it may be beneficial to ensure these initiatives are replicated across all disciplines in the interests of improving the student experience. This is particularly important given that students may have struggled to build a supportive network during the pandemic and may have dealt with the negative effects of isolation, such as loneliness.

2.5   Overall, the Panel found the Personal Tutoring system to be functioning appropriately within the School. It was noted that students found the system to be a good source of reassurance throughout their studies. The Panel acknowledged the requests from staff for further training/guidance to enable them to feel confident when signposting students to the appropriate Student Support Services during a crisis - particularly in relation to mental health concerns.

PART B: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ENHANCEMENT; OUTCOMES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH STAFF AND THE PEDAGOGIC PARTNERSHIP SESSION

3.1   Theme: Employability, Student Experience and Support

3.1.1   Employability was at the forefront of many of the discussions held during the review. The School hosts a number of discipline specific careers events and engagement activities, including but not limited to practice interviews and speed networking. The Panel commended the inclusion of various activities designed to promote practical skills and desirable graduate attributes, which are valued by employers, such as professional etiquette and critical analysis skills. It was noted, however, that whilst there is evidence of embedding employability into the curriculum, for example via the 'History in Practice' course, professional skills need to be more widely and systematically integrated in order to maximise the potential of future graduates.

3.1.2   The Panel commended the School for encouraging its students to engage with the various initiatives provided by the Careers Service, including the 'Star Award' and 'Employability Boost' as well as the level 1 and 2 courses aimed at employability (PD1002: Getting Started at the University of Aberdeen; PD2002/2502: Building skills and experience for career success). It was also noted that the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) worked in collaboration with the School to encourage students to take more courses related to internships. The Panel were pleased to note that there is a week dedicated to employability each year which allows students to meet with professionals and alumni to gain greater insight into industry and to help prepare them for delivering conference-style presentations. The Panel noted that students particularly enjoyed the inclusion of expert guest speakers. The Panel commended the practice of sharing the professional expertise of the University's museum staff with students and welcomed the opportunities for research and work experience within the University's Museums, Archives and Special Collections. The MLitt in Philosophy and Society shows significant promise by encouraging students to consider how to engage with non-academic audiences including local businesses and NHS staff.

3.1.3   Discussions suggested that the general awareness of the opportunities for career development for postgraduate students, such as the AdvanceHE Fellowship, and the services provided by the Postgraduate Research School (PGRS) may differ. One student suggested that the training provided by the Postgraduate Research (PGR) School focused heavily on quantitative research methods or skills which were not necessarily compatible with the needs of the School. Furthermore, it was felt that there was a lack of communication in relation to these opportunities,

particularly in terms of application deadlines, and that it would have been better to receive some of the information during the initial stages of their studies. It was acknowledged that communication between the School, PGRS, and the students could be improved upon particularly in terms of addressing overall feedback. The Panel recommended engaging with the PGRS directly to address these concerns and noted the importance of ensuring the AdvanceHE Fellowship opportunity is advertised by the School to all eligible postgraduate students.

3.1.4 It was explained that the Personal Tutoring system is under review at an institutional level and that the University has been reacting and responding to the significant challenges imposed by the pandemic. The Panel found the feedback obtained from staff and students to be insightful. They noted that students reported feeling that they could contact their assigned tutor easily and they appreciated having a member of academic staff to turn to, out with their classes, if they needed guidance. Members of academic staff described a better response to emails during the pandemic, perhaps as a result of isolation, and noted that the role often involved the more informal distribution of advice or guidance via email rather than via formal face-to-face engagement. Discussions with staff and students revealed that whilst Personal Tutors are not expected to take on the role of counsellors, a general understanding of mental health concerns is appreciated, and staff should be provided with crisis training so that they feel confident signposting students to the appropriate Student Support Services during a crisis.

3.1.5 In terms of fostering a positive student experience, the Panel was pleased to note that the Postgraduate Taught (PGT) community is highly engaged with the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) which should allow for any areas of concern to be swiftly addressed. The Panel also noted the efforts made by the School to offset the isolating effects of the pandemic by timetabling activities, such as the cross-curricular engagement programme "Being Divine", in the absence of face-to-face contact. Furthermore, the Panel commended the School for establishing a PGR symposium for new Theology students to encourage collaboration and networking within the cohort. However, given the uneven distribution of postgraduate students across the School,[1] it may help to replicate similar initiatives within other disciplines to enhance feelings of community.

3.1.6 One of the students advised that she was a first year representative for her Philosophy class and that this was a positive experience overall. She explained that she felt listened to by her lecturers and was able to create change at the request of her fellow students. Another student stated that, in her experience, staff have been receptive to student feedback and that she has witnessed the implementation of student requests in response to their experiences.

3.1.7 During the consultation with support staff, a representative present from Student Support Services advised the Panel that DHPA is one of the most proactive Schools in terms of referring students to disability services and identifying students of concern. The Panel commended the School on their excellent working relationship with Student Support Services and the proactive provision of support.

3.2 Theme: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

3.2.1 The Panel was pleased to note that the School is placing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the forefront of its agenda and that there have been significant steps taken in terms of the decolonisation of the curriculum. Students with who the Panel spoke, stated that they have enjoyed learning about non- Western perspectives, and the reduction in Eurocentrism, but some students felt that progress is slow and may differ between disciplines. The Panel acknowledged these concerns and was reassured that the School is making progress on broadening the curriculum. The School explained that it is a challenging and time-consuming process, however, efforts are ongoing to include different perspectives.

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[1] Divinity attracts the largest numbers of postgraduate students within the School and the School has the second largest PGR cohort in the UK.

3.2.2   During discussions, students identified a number of areas of the curriculum in which they would appreciate an expansion of the material delivered. This included placing a greater focus on African and Ancient History as well as the inclusion of the global missiological movement in Christianity. In the interests of achieving gender balance, one of the students interviewed also expressed the need for greater representation of female academic perspectives particularly within Philosophy.

3.2.3   Students commended the inclusion of mature History students in various societal events in addition to weekly events, such as the 'Phila-Bobbin', an informal get-together for students interested in Philosophy. Social events such as this have helped to strengthen the overall sense of community and ensure this age group is not overlooked.

3.2.4   Students felt that bite-sized video lectures and pre-recorded lectures were good for accessibility purposes. One of the students advised that being able to pause and revisit segments allowed for better note taking. He also stated that having access to lectures in advance meant that he felt better prepared and that it generated better discussions. It was noted that international students may have suffered disproportionately in terms of engagement due to the effects of the pandemic and may have missed lectures due to travel restrictions, technical difficulties, and family obligations.

3.3   Theme: Teaching Practices, Assessment & Delivery (Blended Learning)

3.3.1   In general, students have felt that staff have been supportive and proactive throughout the pandemic. It was felt that any requests for extensions were handled in a timely manner and staff were quick to update students in terms of any changes to delivery or assessment. However, one of the students explained that she had expected to receive her feedback prior to the Christmas break and felt that this should be communicated more clearly in future.

3.3.2   The Panel noted that students appreciated the steps taken to increase diversity of assessment but felt further progress could be made across the disciplines. They stated that they preferred the creativity associated with alternative forms of assessment, such as posters, and found the option to pose their own essay questions very beneficial in preparing themselves for undertaking a dissertation. However, some students felt that certain subjects, such as History, involved more traditional forms of assessment. The Panel welcomed the use of alternative forms of assessment in line with disciplinary requirements and noted the feedback from students that open book "take home" examinations may be preferrable to closed book examinations for those with learning difficulties.

3.3.3   Students appreciated the use of Course Feedback Forms to provide specific feedback on individual courses and their content. A joint MA Philosophy and Psychology student stated that it would be beneficial to include material on the philosophy of emotions to better integrate the disciplines of Philosophy and Psychology. The Panel noted that this may help to aid cohesion as some joint degree students reported feeling as though they were studying separate degrees with little integration.

3.3.4   Students reported that they enjoyed being able to undertake courses of an interdisciplinary nature at sub-Honours level. For example, one student explained that he was able to engage in archaeological fieldtrips and practical courses throughout his first and second year which he felt were very interesting and provided an alternative perspective. The Panel commended this approach as it fosters the skills necessary for interdisciplinary research which is a key component of the Aberdeen 2040 strategy.

3.4   Theme: Programme Development and Management

3.4.1   During discussion, students and colleagues highlighted that they found the School administration team to be approachable and responsive to any questions raised. It was noted that this is invaluable for new members of staff and students. Support staff commented that the hybrid

approach to working was functioning well within shared offices. It was felt that the administration team enjoyed well defined roles and colleagues know who to approach when necessary.

3.4.2   In terms of workload, the administration team reported that it can be demanding especially during certain periods of the year, and when undertaking particular tasks, such as PGR Visa Monitoring. This is particularly important given the pressures associated with a large postgraduate cohort and the various pinch points throughout the academic year. It is noted that the School is committed to developing a strategic action plan in light of the recent staff survey to address workload concerns, and that an application has been made by the School for an additional post within the administrative team. The Panel supported this and noted the importance of ensuring the robustness of delivery in response to both planned leave, such as research leave, and unexpected absence.

3.4.3   It was stated that there are delays of up to six weeks associated with the issuing of offers of admission to PGT students. It was understood by the Panel that this was raised with the admissions team but that it remains an area of concern. This is known to particularly affect international applicants and may hamper the overall competitiveness of the University.

3.4.4   The administration team raised the need for a separate mailing list to ensure campus related information is not dispersed to distance learning students. There are also challenges associated in terms of engagement across various time zones.

3.4.5   Furthermore, it is understood that there exists a challenge in obtaining marketing for the recruitment of PGT students which remains a key priority across the disciplines. The School is encouraged to feed back their experiences to the internal marketing team. This is particularly relevant given the significant restructuring that has taken place in Art History which has seen the recruitment of new staff and the development of new research areas.

3.5 Pedagogic Partnership Discussion

3.5.1   The pedagogic partnership discussion includes many of the topics mentioned during the focused meetings. A summary of the points raised can be found in **Appendix A**. The School are invited to consider this appendix to help inform future practice. Staff and students were given the opportunity to comment on the posts and to discuss the issues highlighted.

3.5.2   Students stated that staff within the School were 'incredibly helpful and wonderful' but felt that there could be greater diversity reflected in staff membership. Online and hybrid learning was said to be well received by the students and postgraduate Philosophy teaching was cited as having a particularly good mix of both online and offline classes. Students stated that, in order to better support blended learning, all rooms would benefit from the facilities required to support hybrid delivery. They also stated that two hours of contact time a week is too little and would like greater opportunities to get to know fellow students. In terms of resources, students noted that whilst the availability of Art History materials has improved, particularly online, there are still not enough Theology resources available online which is problematic for those enrolled on the Online Theology programme. They also reported uneven expectations surrounding workload from week to week across their courses and felt that in some circumstances weekly reading requirements were too extensive.

3.5.3   Students reported that the opportunities for interdisciplinarity learning were very positive and that the current system supports an interdisciplinary approach. However, Staff felt that more interdisciplinary courses could be offered to students at sub-Honours level, especially in Years One and Two, and that the current overlap (such as introductory ethics being taught in both Philosophy and Divinity) could be reduced. They were also dissatisfied with the period of time taken to have proposed changes to assessment or courses approved and found the process arduous. Staff stated that the penalties for late submissions of work have become overly punitive and although the attendance monitoring procedure used to work well, it is now very resource heavy and would

benefit from simplification. Staff stated that the recruitment of PGT students is relatively low despite the high quality of programmes offered and that the resources dedicated to supporting these programmes is vastly disproportionate to the income accrued at present.

3.5.4   Both groups commented on the role of personal tutors (PTs). Academic staff stated that having an impartial member of staff who is not involved in the tutee's classes works well. Staff noted that there is a good support network between staff to assist with any queries that arise on an ad-hoc basis. However, staff felt it was important to achieve a balance between responding effectively to students during times of crisis and signposting appropriately when required. Academic staff also suggested that it may be helpful to have a "handover" of information when tutees change tutors, subject to the student's consent, to provide consistency of advice. It was suggested that training could be improved to help tutors respond to initial moments of crisis but that it was important to remember that personal tutors were not counsellors. Students stated that they recognised this but felt a general awareness of mental health concerns would be beneficial. Staff noted that students may experience difficulties making an appointment with their PT during various crunch points throughout the academic year, such as during examinations. However, the use of weekly group sessions hosted by PhD students appears to have been well received by students, and staff felt that it alleviated the pressure placed on academics.

PART C: SCHOOL ACTION PLAN

4.1   *Enhance the student experience and the level of pastoral support provided:*

(i)   improve integration between cohorts of undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students via a variety of network and community building exercises to enable post-pandemic recovery.

(ii)   ensure Personal Tutors feel adequately supported within the role and consider the provision of further guidance on how best to support and signpost students in crisis.

4.2   *Champion employability, Graduate Attributes and skills:*

(i)   determine opportunities for further integration of desirable Graduate Attributes and employability skills in the curriculum.

(ii)   strengthen the support and guidance provided for students at pre-Honours level in terms of employability and upskilling.

(iii)   enhance communication with students (particularly Postgraduate Research students) in terms of raising awareness of the training opportunities delivered by the Postgraduate Research School and strengthening existing links with the Careers Service.

(iv)   consider dedicating an area of the School's webpages to employability and graduate outcomes (potentially including information on alumni or relevant case studies) and information relating to opportunities that exist out with a career in academia.

(v)   consider establishing a PGR symposium for each discipline in order to encourage networking and collaboration within these cohorts.

4.3   *Review Teaching and Learning practices and principles:*

(i)   prioritise the planned programme review in order to determine the coherence of the curriculum.

(ii)   undertake a review of assessments to ensure diversity across disciplines, confirm their appropriateness and ascertain assessment loads.

(iii) consider the implementation of a dedicated forum for the sharing of good practice outside of the Teaching and Learning Committee.

4.4 ***Ensure capacity building and the sustainable management of staff workloads:***

(i) continue to review staff workloads and ensure an appropriate balance and division of workload.

(ii) build resilience by addressing the shortfall within the administration team, especially in response to the pressures associated with a large cohort of Postgraduate Research students.

(iii) seek to improve the resilience of programmes in terms of accommodating research leave and staff absences.

APPENDIX

PPS - Staff Feedback

Pedagogic Partnership Session

KYRA   APR 26, 2022 11:56AM

What is the School doing well?

works well that students have access to an academic (personal tutor) who is not involved with their teaching/classes

staff within the school supporting personal tutors as questions arise (but a bit ad hoc)

Re: personal tutoring, Our job is not to be counsellors, but to be a point of initial contact/guidance to other university services

students on pt system:

pt is good. If the pt is in another school, then staff need to keep in contact with one another. if it works, it's good. but if it is not working, then it doesn't work. so it depends on who you are allocated. This is more of an issue if the staff tutor is in another dept.

students on pts:

at crunch moments in the year, there are challenges in making an appointment with a pt.
during the pandemic, in art history the drop in sessions felt a bit strange/awkward.
before the pandemic, it was easier to put a face to a name. hopefully things will ne easier now.
the personal t system doesn't appear to be in place for Theology Certificate students who are studying online.
more helpful than the pt system was a session in which phd students ran a group session. this took responsibility away from the academics. the student liked this.
this particular session met weekly, for S1 of Y1 and it was rewarding. would like to see this replicated

What could the School improve upon?

Personal tutoring

Training could be improved for personal tutors facing students with real crisis situations (e.g. mental health crises)

when students change to a different tutor, would be helpful to have some "handover" so that information is shared and some consistency in advice — ANONYMOUS

provision of information of where to direct students — ANONYMOUS

Important though to not make personal tutors into counsellors - we're academic advisors and shouldn't be expected to give students a steer for issues outwith our remit — ANONYMOUS

yes, personal tutors are not counsellors but it is important to respond in initial moments of crisis without making issues worse for students- so a balance of both being equipped and being able to hand over to other services would be ideal — ANONYMOUS

PGT

We offer great PGT programmes but attract small numbers of students. Staff time and resource dedicated to these programmes is vastly disproportionate to income accrued. We are looking into online PGT degrees, but again, this would require a lot of staff time. This is an ongoing challenge for us.

students on PT programme: — ANONYMOUS

I think we could offer more interdisciplinary courses, especially at 1st and 2nd year, with staff from different departments teaching. There is some overlap (e.g. introductory ethics is taught in both Philosophy and Divinity) which could be reduced too.

students on this: they have heard that art history is planning on working on a collaborative course with English and this sounds exciting and positive. interdisciplinary degrees are a good development. it is good that ug students can try other modules at sub-hons (the advantages of the Scottish system). — ANONYMOUS

an art hist student acknowledges that they haven't taken courses in history or philosophy, although acknowledges that it would have been good to have done this. — ANONYMOUS

that said, the students recognise that there are disciplinary-specific skillsets they need to acquire, and they don't want these to be neglected. — ANONYMOUS

students on interdisciplinary: — ANONYMOUS

C6 and C7

The attendance monitoring (C6/C7) procedure used to work well, but it has become over-complicated and takes up a lot of staff time. It needs to be simplified.

Lateness penalties for assessed work have become overly punitive

students on pts:

staff should be better at signposting. directing students to different academic units who offer professional support in specific fields.
staff are not councillors: students recognise this. but staff could be more familiar with mental health conditions. recognising symptoms etc.

Course change forms

The course change process takes place far too early, and requires a ridiculously long form. Same thing for new courses. Minor changes should be able to be proposed and approved online quickly, and at relatively short notice. There is no reason why it should take 10 months to propose and approve a change to assessment.

students on pts:

students are not 100% clear about the role of pts, and how this works at a University level. better communication would be beneficial here.

What should the School stop doing?

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PPS - Student Feedback

Pedagogic Partnership Session

KYRA   APR 26, 2022 11:53AM

What is the School doing well?

Faculty

Philosophy (PGT) staff is incredibly helpful and wonderful. To the point where we're sad we don't have enough classes in a week!
— ANONYMOUS

Reading Sources

More sources for Art History are available online. Some are still only available physically at the library with one copy, but it has gotten better.   **— ANONYMOUS**

Not enough available online for Theology (Online) program, who, by nature of the program, cannot access physical library.
— ANONYMOUS

Hybrid Learning

Has been mostly good. Philosophy (PGT) has had a good mix of both online and offline classes.   **— ANONYMOUS**

What could the School improve upon?

Diversity.

There is not one person of colour tutor/professor in our classes and I think that can be improved upon.   **— ANONYMOUS**

Sense of community

not enough opportunities to get to know other students on same degree [Art History, Theology (Online)]

Despite the number of students in each year being quite low. Might be because of covid, but it was the case before the pandemic as well.   **— ANONYMOUS**

Contact hours

Students feel that two contact hours a week is a bit too little.
— ANONYMOUS

Hybrid Learning and Online Resources

All rooms need to have online facilities so hybrid learning can be more accessible and successful.   **— ANONYMOUS**

Feedback and assessment

Feedback has not been given before 6-8 weeks, which is way too long. It should be returned in three weeks.   **— ANONYMOUS**

Assignments have been mostly essays and would benefit from some variety. (problem across History, Divinity, and Art History)
— ANONYMOUS

What should the School stop doing?

Workload

uneven expectations/workload from week to week within courses
— ANONYMOUS

Expectations are too high of some students (e.g. weekly readings are quite high).   **— ANONYMOUS**

Feedback and Assessments

Divinity - Instead of essays, there should be different types of assessments (other than essays). Essays also have different requirements in different courses, so the student has to end up prioritising one course over the other.   **— ANONYMOUS**

don't force consistency in assessments across courses because sometimes the "common" assessment doesn't make sense
— ANONYMOUS

diversity in art history is excellent   **— ANONYMOUS**

staff comment: diversity of assessments in art history
— ANONYMOUS

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