

**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**  
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**FINAL REPORT**

PANEL VISIT: TUESDAY 29 AND WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL 2014

**PANEL:**

Dr David Hendry ..... Convener  
 Dr Michelle Pinard ..... School of Biological Sciences  
 Dr Archie Graham ..... School of Education  
 Mr Rob Henthorn ..... President for Education and Employability, AUSA  
 Dr Paloma Gay y Blasco ..... External Subject Specialist, University of St Andrews  
 Dr Jill Steans ..... External Subject Specialist, University of Birmingham  
 Professor Lynn Jamieson ..... External Subject Specialist, University of Edinburgh  
 Ms Katja Christie ..... Deputy Academic Registrar  
 Ms Emma Webb ..... Clerk

**SCHEDULE:**

DAY 1	
Tuesday 29 April 2014	
Head of School	Professor Marysia Zalewski
College Director of Teaching and Learning	Professor Ali Lumsden
College Director of Graduate School	Dr Chris Kee
School Director of Teaching and Learning	Dr Anders Widfelt
School Director of Postgraduate Affairs	Dr Andrew McKinnon
School Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer	Professor Debra Gimlin
Heads of Department	Dr Mervyn Bain, Dr John Bone, Dr Alex King
Programme Directors	Dr Andrew Whitehouse (People & Environment), Mr Jim Wyllie (Strategic Studies), Dr Chris Kollmeyer (Globalization)
Examinations Officer	Dr Tanya Argounova-Low and Dr Chris Kollmeyer
Representatives from the Teaching Teams (permanent members of staff) Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught, Course Co-coordinators	Dr Maggie Bolton, Dr Alison Brown & Dr Jo Vergunst (Anthropology); Dr Joanne McEvoy, Dr Mervyn Bain & Dr Andrea Oelsner, (PIR); Professor Bernie Hayes, Professor Steve Bruce & Dr John Nagle (Sociology)
Postgraduate Research Supervisors	Dr Martin Mills & Dr Nancy Wachowich (Anthropology); Professor Michael Smith & Dr Joanne McEvoy (PIR); Professor Debra Gimlin & Dr Rhoda Wilkie (Sociology)
New members of staff (permanent contracts)	Dr Tom Bentley & Dr Stuart Durkin (PIR); Dr Luisa Gandolfo, Dr Gearoid Millar & Dr John Nagle (Sociology).
Temporary Services Teaching Staff (contract staff)	Mr Donald Lyon, Mr Norman Prell, (Anthropology); Ms Jenny Wilson, Ms Kandida Purnell, Mr Stuart Maltman (PIR); Ms Sarah Peat, Ms Rachel Anderson; Ms Laurie Lee Robertson (Sociology)

Advisers of Study and Personal Tutors	Dr Martin Mills (Anthropology), Dr Jo Vergunst (Anthropology, Dr Andrea Teti (PIR), Dr Gearoid Millar (Sociology) and Mr Tony Glendinning (Sociology)
Disability Co-ordinator(s)	Dr Joanne McEvoy (PIR)
Equality and Diversity Advisor	Dr Marta Trzebiatowska (Sociology)
Director of Student Recruitment and Experience	Dr Lynn Bennie (PIR)
<b>DAY 2</b>	
Wednesday 30 April	
School Administrator, administrative and secretarial staff, technicians and other support staff	Mrs Pam Thomson (School Admin Officer), Mrs Elaine Brown (School Admin Assistant), Ms Jill Davis, Ms Susan Kilpatrick, Ms Kerry Boyne.
PGR students	Ms Louise Senior and Mr Donald Lyon (Anthropology) Ms Kanida Purnell, Mr Waleed Alothman and Ms Rachel McIver (PIR) Ms Sarah Peat and Ms Rachel Anderson (Sociology)
Postgraduate Taught Students	Ms Elaine Sherrifs (Anthropology) Mr Wadner Pierre, Mr Augustinus Mohn and Ms Catriona McGregor (Sociology)
Undergraduate Students (Levels 1 and 2)	Ms Anca Stanescu and Alison Noble (Anthropology) Ms Abigail Sked, Mr Jethro Rolland and Ms Ysabelle McGuire (PIR) Ms Margot Fairclough (Sociology)
Undergraduate Students (Level 3 and 4)	Mr Noah Walker Crawford, Mr Christian Hatim, Mr Craig Byiers and Ms Jane Bedingfield (Anthropology) Ms Anna Kere, Ms Amanda Majakulma (PIR) Ms Chloe Copland (Sociology)
Class Reps/Programme Reps and other students involved in SSLC	Ms Anne Konrad (Programme Rep Year 4 Joint Honours Sociology and International Relations) Ms Kitte Fabricius (Programme Rep Year 4 PIR) Ms Kim Kaak (Sociology Year 5 Rep)

**Additional comments on the self-evaluation document were received from:**

Convener: Quality Assurance Committee ..... Dr Kath Shennan  
 Equal Opportunities Adviser..... Ms Christina Cameron  
 College Director of Teaching & Learning  
 ..... Professor Ali Lumsden

**Overall Impressions**

Throughout the two day review the Panel witnessed a School that is collegiate and united in approach to delivering a high quality, research-led student experience. This was not only evident amongst academic staff delivering content to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students, but also from administrative staff who were enthusiastic about their roles within the School, and whom help create a strong support network for staff and students. It was evident throughout the review that all staff are approachable, and that students and staff can turn to one another for support and advice. It was also very clear that Postgraduate Research Students were well integrated into the School, and were being nurtured in their research and careers, with opportunities to teach being invaluable to their development.

Research-led teaching was a repetitive theme throughout the SED and the Panel explored this throughout the two-day review. It became clear that research-led teaching was firmly embedded within the School with students at all levels as well as staff, being fully aware of the concept and the benefits that it has.

Research-led teaching underpins much of the pedagogical orientation within the School. This in turn, brings a strong sense of cohesion, progression and purpose to teaching, learning and assessment. New staff and PGR students are encouraged and supported into fitting in with this concept from an early stage in their role in the School. New staff are encouraged to contribute to current and new course design, allowing them to disseminate their own research and interests into the curriculum. PGR students are also afforded this opportunity by using their knowledge in tutorials to guide undergraduate students, and also allowing PGR students to include material drawn from their own research into tutorial discussion.

Several areas of good practice were recorded from the review and are detailed within the body of this report. The School distinctly operates as three departments, for which there has historically been strong support for maintaining the integrity of the academic disciplines and providing degree programmes with a distinctive disciplinary focus. There are merits of maintaining this system which are explained within the Self Evaluation Document (SED) and were made clear to the Panel throughout the review. Notwithstanding the merits of this organisation of the School the Panel felt that at times it can inhibit cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary collaboration and sharing of good practice, which is increasingly encouraged by research funders and is also encouraged in initiatives focused on internationalisation.

The School has a very good awareness of the issues and challenges it is facing, and continues to provide an excellent student experience, albeit at some cost in staff time, despite decreased staff numbers and additional load arising from change within the University.

## **1 Range of Provision**

1.1 The School of Social Sciences offers the following programmes:

- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology
- Designated Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Archaeology
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Celtic Civilisation
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Divinity
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Economics
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and English
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Film & Visual Culture
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Finance
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and French
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Gaelic Studies
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Geography
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and German
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Hispanic Studies
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and History
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and History of Art
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and International Relations
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Language & Linguistics
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Legal Studies
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Management Studies
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Philosophy
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Politics
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Psychology
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Religious Studies,
- Degree of Master of Arts in Anthropology and Sociology

Degree of Master of Arts in Politics & International Relations (Single Honours)  
Designated Degree of Master of Arts in Political Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Anthropology  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Divinity  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Economics  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and English  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Finance  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and French Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Gender Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Film & Visual Culture  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Finance  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and French  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Geography  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and German Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Hispanic Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and History  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Language & Linguistics  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Legal Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Literature in a World Context  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Management Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Philosophy  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Religious Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in International Relations and Sociology  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Anthropology  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Divinity  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Economics  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Finance  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and French Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Gaelic Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and German Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Hispanic Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and History  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Legal Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Management Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Philosophy  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Religious Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Politics and Sociology  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology  
Designated Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Accountancy  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Anthropology  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Celtic Civilisation  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Divinity  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Economics  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and English  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Entrepreneurship  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Film & Visual Culture  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Finance  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and French  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Gaelic Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Geography  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and German  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Hispanic Studies  
Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and History

Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and International Relations  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Legal Studies  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Management Studies  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Mathematics  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Philosophy  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Politics  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Psychology  
 Degree of Master of Arts in Sociology and Religious Studies  
 Master of Science in International Relations  
 Master of Science in International Relations & International Law  
 Master of Science in Strategic Studies  
 Master of Science in Strategic Studies & International Law  
 Master of Science in Strategic Studies & Management Studies  
 Master of Science in Latin American Studies  
 Master of Science in Anthropology of Religion  
 Master of Science in People & the Environment  
 Master of Science in Globalization  
 Master of Science in Religion and Society  
 Master of Science in Sex, Gender, Violence: Contemporary Critical Approaches  
 Master of Science in Sociology  
 Master of Science in Global Conflict and Peace Processes – from September 2014  
 Master of Science in Post-Conflict Justice and Peacebuilding – from September 2014  
 Master of Science in Energy Politics & Law – from September 2014  
 Master of Science in Radicalization & Resistance – from September 2014  
 Master of Science in Refugee & Displacement Studies – from September 2014  
 Master of Research in Political Research  
 Master of Research in Social Research  
 Master of Research in Social Anthropology  
 Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology  
 Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy in Politics and International Relations  
 Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

1.2 The Panel **commended** the range of provision.

1.3 The Panel **commended** the School's contribution towards the provision of Sixth Century Courses.

## **2 Aims of Provision**

2.1 The School states that its aims of provision are:

- a) to provide Undergraduate students with a broadly based foundation in the disciplines of Sociology, Anthropology, and Politics and International Relations.
- b) to introduce students to basic ideas and concepts, as well as encouraging critical thinking by placing familiar topics and issues within a wider comparative and conceptual framework.
- c) to provide excellent and rigorous teaching equipping our students with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes necessary for the contemporary world of future study as well as citizenship and employment.
- d) in compliance with the University Curriculum Reform a key aim is to equip students graduating from the University of Aberdeen with the breadth of knowledge,

understanding and skills required for professional and personal achievement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

- e) to convey to students that learning is not just about collecting and collating ready-made information, but about participating actively in an ongoing process of knowledge construction (if simultaneously learning to critically question such constructions).
- f) to ensure that group discussion is embedded in a research ethos, with the aim of producing Honours students who can think critically for themselves and advance independent arguments.
- g) to equip Postgraduate students with the theoretical and conceptual tools, methods of empirical research, and skills of oral and written communication, as well as with the substantive knowledge of relevant fields of study, that they can take into their future academic or professional careers.

### 3 Staffing

- 3.1 The Panel **commended** the School on its positive culture and collegiality amongst academic colleagues. This is echoed by and within the support staff in the School. Staff have created a friendly and supportive environment within the School, which was made evident to the Panel by several of the staff who were interviewed as part of the review. New staff provided examples such as being supported by current staff in new academic and administrative tasks, and students praised administrative and academic staff on their support, approachability and willingness to help in a very timely manner.
- 3.2 The Panel **commended** the School that despite ongoing difficulties with staffing levels staff contribute to providing an excellent student experience despite the additional workload on staff. This was evident amongst all staff interviewed, and supported by students at both the Undergraduate and Postgraduate level.
- 3.3 The Panel was made aware of the issues regarding staffing levels in the School such as the very high student:staff ratio, particularly within Politics and International Relations (PIR). Staff morale in the School has been quite low, and affected more so by the ongoing changes and implementation of new initiatives across the University, such as OneSource, Personal Tutoring, and the implementation of the Code of Practice on Assessment. The Head of School felt that staff turnover and low morale had been affected by the wide range of initiatives and the processes associated with them and in the wake of the Research Excellence Framework exercise staff are being enticed by better job opportunities within the sector.
- 3.4 The Panel recognised that despite budgetary restrictions within the College of Arts and Social Science the School had been able to recruit additional staff, including five appointments within PIR, and noted that the School hoped these new appointments would have an impact from the start of the Academic Year 2014/15.
- 3.5 The Panel met new members of staff from PIR and Sociology. The Panel **commended** the supportive environment provided for new members of staff. Whilst there is a formal mentoring system in Sociology and a more informal system in PIR, all staff appreciated the mechanisms in place and felt comfortable approaching different members of staff, depending on the advice or support they needed. New members of staff spoke positively about the open door policy of senior staff in respect of newer staff members' queries.

- 3.6 The Panel discussed the workload model used by the School, its visibility to School staff and impact on staff morale. The workload model took account of both teaching and administrative duties. The model had been adopted in its entirety within Sociology and Anthropology, and was still a work in progress in PIR. There was some disparity amongst staff on the level of transparency with the model which was causing some tension. It was noted that some staff felt that large Postgraduate Taught classes were not fully recognised in the workload model. The Panel therefore **recommended** that (i) the workload model is brought to completion in all departments and (ii) that there is a satisfactory level of transparency of the workload criteria. It was noted that the University-wide Framework for Academic Expectations is not fully implemented within the School. This is a College wide phenomenon.
- 3.7 The Panel **commended** the engagement between School staff and the Student Support Service and associated services. Students felt there was always a member of staff available to provide support and advice, whether it be from academic or support staff. Staff in the School recognised and appreciated the ability and ease of referring students to the appropriate service.
- 3.8 The Panel met with a range of secretarial and administrative staff, and was impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm they displayed towards their roles within the wider School. The Panel **commended** the engagement of the support staff in the College Support Staff forum, and their efforts to maximise the opportunity to network and share good practice. The Panel was also impressed with support staff engagement with wider University initiatives, such as the implementation of OneSource and Personal Tutoring, and commitment to providing a high level of service to staff and students within the School. The Panel also **commended** the School for encouraging support staff to attend University courses for Continuing Professional Development.
- 3.9 The School ensures there is some capacity in the workload of Teaching Fellows to concentrate on their research, for which the Panel **commended** the School. However it was observed that the School teaching fellows did not appear to interact fully with the University-wide Teaching Fellow Network (cross reference 12.2).

#### 4 School Organisation

- 4.1 The Panel appreciated the importance of maintaining three distinct departments within the School. The departmental distinctiveness is mirrored in the administrative office; although departmental secretaries do follow School-wide procedures. The Panel was pleased to see departments working with each other in areas including course development, such as the Level 3 course "100 Works that Changed the World". However, the Panel felt there were several areas of individual good practice (see various points across report, including but not limited to 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.17) across the disciplines and **recommended** the Schools look at the fora available for communication of best practice within and across departments. Cross fertilisation within the School will help increase innovative practices and potentially reduce workload and increase staff morale.
- 4.2 The Panel carefully reviewed the Committee structure within the School, the preponderance of both School and departmental committees and the interactions between these fora. It was clear that there is good communication and dissemination of information the majority of the time, and noted that staff appeared happy with the structure. The Panel questioned whether the large number of school and departmental committees and the potential for duplication within these committees added to the perception of school level bureaucracy. There was a feeling amongst staff interviewed that they were not always fully consulted regarding wider institutional initiatives. Therefore the Panel **recommended** that the School undertakes a review of its Committee structure

with a view to streamlining the structure, improving the flow of information, reducing workload and enabling a more strategic approach to strategic goals and activities. The Panel suggested that this includes discussion on how to engage more effectively with the College strategic plans to provide empowerment to staff within the School, ensuring that staff are aware of ongoing planning initiatives.

## **5 Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval**

- 5.1 The Panel **commended** the School encouraging all staff to participate in course and programme design based on their own areas of research.
- 5.2 The Panel also noted that the School actively encouraged new staff to contribute to new course design, and to current courses and the School is to be **commended** for this as it actively engages new staff in disseminating their own research interests. It was clear that new staff felt supported by their peers in contributing to course and programme design.
- 5.3 The Panel was impressed with the breadth of courses offered across the School, and students appreciated the opportunities made available to them. However students at the honours level raised concerns regarding the courses actually available to take; for example courses that had been advertised as being available at the start of Level 3 were no longer available at Level 4, therefore restricting course choice. Students were dissatisfied with this, as they were left with a small number of courses open to choose from, particularly in Sociology. The Panel was sympathetic to the fact that occasionally unforeseen circumstances will result in course choices being limited, however the Panel **recommended** that forward planning of teaching is as thorough as possible and further **recommended** there is detailed communication to students of course opportunities available to them over their two honours years.
- 5.4 All staff that the Panel met gave the impression of being very reflective within their own courses and programmes.

## **6 Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

- 6.1 The Panel **commended** the School for clearly providing programmes at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught levels that meet the learning needs and expectations of students.
- 6.2 The Panel **commended** the School for embedding research-led teaching within all disciplines and within all levels of the curriculum; it was evident from the Panel's meetings with students that students have a sound understanding of this concept. Students also positively commented that research-led teaching provides relevance to teaching, and ensures topics are current.
- 6.3 The Panel **commended** the use of peer review of assessment at Undergraduate and Postgraduate level, and other innovative and meaningful assessments such as requiring students to write their own essay titles in PIR at Postgraduate Taught level. This is another example of embedding research-led teaching in the curriculum and particularly at Postgraduate Taught level, helping students prepare to undertake a PhD.
- 6.4 The Panel **commended** the use of book and journal commentaries as a method of assessment. Student feedback was positive, and it encourages wider reading of key texts. This is an example of best practice within Anthropology which the Panel would **recommend** is disseminated more widely across the School.



- 6.5 Students appreciated the opportunity of submitting draft assignments as an example of formative assessment within Sociology. Students noted that this was becoming more common amongst courses at Level 3 and 4 and would like this type of formative assessment to be rolled out. The Panel **commended** this practice, and encouraged staff to discuss increasing the use of this type of assessment, where appropriate.
- 6.6 There were varying levels of satisfaction from students concerning feedback on assessment and evidence of different practices in use within departments. The Panel **commended** the efforts of staff in providing detailed feedback such as returned essay scripts, but **recommended** that departments seek to ensure consistency should be applied to improve the overall standard of feedback being returned to students.
- 6.7 The Panel was provided with two examples of feedback from a student, one which the student preferred, and one which the student was dissatisfied with. On examination of the feedback forms, the Panel felt that both examples were satisfactory. This suggests that student expectations vary, and therefore to attempt to improve satisfaction the School may wish to consider managing students expectations of feedback. The University has an enhancing feedback website which the School may wish to use to help with this.
- 6.8 Students would like to receive feedback from their exams. As this is institutional policy, the Panel **recommended** that the School ensure policies on feedback on examinations are made more visible to staff and students.
- 6.9 The School expressed anxieties about the introduction of anonymous marking and asked the Panel for its opinion. All External Panel members use a form of anonymous marking and were positive about the objectiveness it embedded in marking. Examples of electronic systems were given where assignments may be de-anonymised to take account of special circumstances. The External Panel members also discussed that dissertations were not marked anonymously, however different systems were used such as blind double marking, and supervisors are not permitted to mark their student's dissertations to maintain objectivity. Some External Panel members Exam Boards are anonymous, where students are referred to by ID number rather than name.
- 6.10 The Panel noted that Anthropology provides excellent preparation to Undergraduate students for their dissertations, particularly the preparatory work carried out in level 3. Students at level 3, 4 and PhD were particularly enthusiastic about this. The Panel **recommended** that this best practice is disseminated, particularly to PIR who are considering revising their research methods training at level 3.
- 6.11 PIR had queries regarding the development of a Research Methods in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century course. The goals of which is to prepare students for their dissertation but also embed students with skills that they will benefit from in other courses. The Panel expressed that it is important to balance the practicalities and pedagogic reasons of such a course. Often students can lose enthusiasm, but need to understand the benefit of the preparation such a course has for research skills. It was suggested that practical examples are incorporated and that the School should consider the possibility of introducing such a course at an earlier level, perhaps Level 2.
- 6.12 It was noted that some courses were delivered to classes comprising both Postgraduate taught students and Undergraduate level 3 students. The Panel seeks assurances from the School that different intended learning outcomes and different forms of assessment are provided to such cohorts.

A small number of students interviewed felt that teaching was from an Anglo American perspective, without sufficient reference to for example African writers. The Panel **recommended** that the intention of the School to embed diversity and internationalisation within the curriculum be clearly visible to all students.

6.13 The Panel received in depth feedback from students regarding their tutorial experience at Level 1 and 2, particularly surrounding the teaching methods and perhaps the over-use of student presentations. Students were unclear as to the purpose of producing presentations and did not feel any benefit from listening to large numbers of presentations. After considering the comments the Panel **recommended** that the School review and enhance the teaching methods used in tutorials, particular with regards to the use and purpose of presentations, ensuring students received feedback from these presentations. The Panel appreciated that presentations are a method of ensuring engagement and participation of students in tutorials, and offer opportunities to develop key graduate attributes but feel that this needs to be made more explicit to students, whilst other methods can be explored to compliment the delivery of presentations.

6.14 It was also noted from feedback that the Panel received from students that whilst the performance of many tutors was excellent and innovative, there were instances where tutors were unable to provide a satisfactory level of teaching. Therefore it is **recommended** that a monitoring system is put in place to monitor the use of tutors who lack experience and confidence.

The Panel did note that students were willing to provide feedback on their experience, but may need additional signposting to ensure there is a transparent system in place that allows students to quickly and effectively raise issues with regards to their tutors.

6.15 Concerns were raised with regards to the consistency of credit versus workload. Several students commented that a course previously weighted as a 30 credit course and was now a 15 credit course had maintained the quantity of assessment as the original 30 credit course. The Panel was aware that this may not be a frequent occurrence but recommend the School ensure that expected assessment levels are commensurate with credit weightings.

6.16 None of the students interviewed had been directly affected by the capping of courses, however Honours students felt very strongly about the issue and expressed their concern over the subject, and how unhappy they would be if they were unable to take a course they had selected due to a cap. Students were aware of instances where several students drop out of courses, creating space in the class, but students were not informed and therefore unable to join. The Panel **recommended** that the administration surrounding the capping of courses is reviewed.

6.17 The Panel noted that students in sub honours Sociology were extremely impressed with the use of course readers. Students would like to see this practice extended and more sources made available online where possible. Students were also impressed with the new library procedure allowing automatic three-day renewal.

6.18 The School acknowledged that the high student staff ratios probably have a negative effect on students, particularly within PIR. Students have noted high tutorial class sizes of over 20. The Panel was aware of the high student:staff ratio, and recognised the new recruitment of five posts within the department which may help alleviate this.

## **7 Course and Programme Monitoring and Review**

- 7.1 The Panel **commended** staff who encouraged feedback in methods other than SCEF forms. There were examples of staff placing envelopes on doors for notes, and asking students to provide email feedback following tutorials. Some of these examples were undertaken by tutors.
- 7.2 Students felt SCEF forms were taken very seriously and appreciated that the minutes were posted on MyAberdeen.
- 7.3 Students expressed their dissatisfaction at the low completion rates from SCEF and how students fail to engage with the process, and fail to realise the importance of completing them. Students felt it was unfair to expect staff to make improvements if they are not provided with appropriate feedback. Staff are also concerned about low SCEF response rates. The Panel **recommended** that the School continues to encourage students to engage with the system.
- 7.4 As explored further in section 12 the School has difficulty engaging Class Reps in School Committees, and therefore can lack student input into Staff-Student liaison committee (SSLC) meetings and other methods of programme and course review.
- 7.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School consider holding SSLCs at different levels to make the discussion more meaningful for all concerned. Students would only be attending SSLC's that were relevant to their year of study, and might be more willing to attend. This was following a suggestion from students

## **8 Academic standards and the academic infrastructure**

- 8.1 The School is asked to ensure that where Postgraduate Taught students are taught with lower levels the separate cohorts have differing intended learning outcomes and assessments, as noted in 6.12.
- 8.2 Notwithstanding this, the Panel is satisfied with the documentation provided in the SED and its associated appendices in regard to academic standards and academic infrastructure.

## **9 Training and supervision of research students**

- 9.1 The Panel was impressed by the level of community spirit amongst the PGR students it met, and **commended** PGR Supervisors on their level of accessibility to students which was highly appreciated by students.
- 9.2 Students noted that changes to supervisors had been handled well and students had been kept well informed in such instances; importantly students felt well supported by other staff when supervision gaps had occurred.
- 9.3 The School was **commended** for its flexibility in allowing new PGR students who had not previously undertaken the MRes programme, to attend those MRes courses they felt would be of help to their studies.
- 9.4 The Panel noted that the School offered various initiatives to help students engage with academia and develop their careers. In Anthropology, participation in the STAR programme was popular and valued highly. Students were very positive about student- led seminars and peer review of

dissertation work. All these activities combine to embed a strong research culture within the School and amongst the students for which the School can be **commended**.

- 9.5 The Panel was pleased to note that the PGR students were satisfied with both the library resources available and the skills training opportunities offered centrally and by the School.
- 9.6 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to remind Postgraduate taught and research students of the support services regarding English Language that are available across the University.
- 9.7 It was clear that opportunities made available by the School to allow students to deliver sub honours tutorials were popular and valued highly as a career development opportunity; students felt strongly that this work opportunity helped in their academic and intellectual development and gave an important insight into the life of an academic. The School is to be **commended** for encouraging PGR teaching assistants to utilise their own research in their tutorial delivery and noted that this is appreciated by the Undergraduate students who felt it brought greater context to the more theoretical aspects of courses.

## **10 Personal development and employability**

- 10.1 The Panel felt that the School was actively embedding employability and personal development throughout its programmes, however sensed there was a lack of recognition of this by the School. The School should be confident in its efforts, and the Panel **recommended** that the School continue with current initiatives and continue to educate staff and students on the activities offered, such as the Attractive Prospects event which ran in 2013.
- 10.2 It was evident that there are opportunities for all levels of students to be engaged with employment and career development opportunities, from alumni speaking to Undergraduates on their careers, work experience and work placements becoming integrated into the Masters programmes, and the ability for research students to teach. The Panel **recommended** that the School engages further with and utilises alumni and develops its links with the Careers service to develop opportunities and activities within the School. The Panel shared examples of good practice with the School, such as a bespoke Careers Day that had taken place in the School of Biological Sciences and the example of a 20 credit work experience module at the University of Birmingham.
- 10.3 The Panel **recommends** that the School engages with the College level MA Advisory Board to look further at the opportunity of engaging with external companies and organisations.

## **11 Professional units/bodies**

- 11.1 The Panel noted that the School and its constituent departments are not accredited by any Professional or Statutory Body.

## **12 Staff Training and Educational Development**

- 12.1 The Panel was made aware of several innovative ideas in terms of course content and, methods of assessment, including peer review and selecting their own essay title (cross reference 6.3).

However the Panel felt this could be improved further in terms of delivery and **recommended** that a forum to share and discuss ideas be created within the School, across departments.

- 12.2 Following on from the above point, the Panel **recommended** that the staff be encouraged to engage and participate with the Network of Teaching Fellows at the University to share ideas of best practice in innovation of teaching and assessment, in terms of delivery not just content (cross reference 3.9).
- 12.3 New staff discussed their attendance at the two day teaching course. Although there are varying opinions on the use of the course this is not a reflection on the School. The Panel suggests that staff ensure feedback is returned following course attendance.
- 12.4 It was noted from the SED that some staff had taken the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning and are encouraged to participate. The Panel **commended** the School on this.
- 12.5 The Panel **commended** the School on the opportunity and encouragement given to support staff as well as academic staff to undertake CPD (cross reference to 3.8).
- 12.6 The Panel noted that the School provides a school-wide session for all PGRs regarding tutorial and assessment delivery in addition to the training offered by CAD.
- 12.7 Given the feedback from students regarding the delivery of tutorials (cross reference 6.13) the Panel **recommended** that the School review and enhance teaching methods in tutorials, particularly at sub honours. Students felt there were too many presentations to prepare for, which in turn received little feedback if any; students were not appreciative of the skills and attributes such activities could develop. The Panel **recommended** that this is addressed as part of enhanced tutor training. Training should be reviewed for tutors to ensure they can offer and facilitate a range of teaching and learning activities in tutorials.
- 12.8 The Panel **commended** the School on the Tutor Training Manual.

### **13 Student involvement in quality processes**

- 13.1 A recurring theme identified by the Panel was the lack of engagement with the School by Class Representatives. This was illustrated when despite the best efforts of both the School and the Students' Association, the School had received a very poor response to the call for Class Reps to attend the ITR Panel interviews.
- 13.2 Those students who attended SSLCs felt that their comments were taken seriously by staff. It was noted that SSLCs are held at a department level. Interestingly, none of the students interviewed by the Panel were aware of the School Advisory Board.
- 13.3 Generally all students interviewed by the Panel (including non-Class Reps) felt that they could approach staff within the School if they had an issue that they wanted to discuss. Although students welcomed the approachability of staff on an as and when basis, and the Panel would not wish to discourage this, the Class Reps felt that if staff engaged more specifically with the Reps, as well as the class as a whole, it would be more empowering and create a more specific role for the Rep. The School may wish to liaise with current Reps and staff on how this could be achieved. The Panel therefore **recommended** that the School continues to work with the Students' Association to

implement the Class Rep system, and considers new ways in which staff could actively engage students in their role. The Panel was mindful that this also requires the engagement from the students.

- 13.4 There was also discussion surrounding student representation on other Committees within the School such as the School Advisory Group. Where the School would like to encourage student representation on a Committee the Panel reminded the School that they can seek help from the Student's Association. The Panel also **recommended** that the School seek to gain student representation on the Student Experience Committee.
- 13.5 Students raised issues specifically about the Class Rep system itself such as lack of communication about elections, lack of engagement from students, and poor structure. These comments are not directly related to the School, and were therefore reported back to the Students' Association. The Panel noted the changes to the system this year, such as introduction of online elections and formal training, and it was agreed that the Students' Association should continue to work with the School on the implementation and practice of Class Reps. Additionally, students interviewed who were not Class Reps were unable to tell the Panel who their Class Reps are.
- 13.6 Students expressed their dissatisfaction at the low completion rates from SCEF and how students fail to engage with the process, and fail to realise the importance of completing them. Students felt it was unfair to expect staff to make improvements if they are not provided with appropriate feedback (cross reference section 7.)

#### **14 Public information/management information**

*This area was not explored during the review.*

#### **15 Student support, retention and progression**

- 15.1 It was apparent throughout the review that the level of support from all staff in the School to students is exemplary. From the small sample of students interviewed the Panel felt confident **commending** the disability provisions within the School; student feedback in this regard was excellent.
- 15.2 There were comments from a small number of students who did not feel integrated into the School as a whole. The Panel **recommended** that departments consider the individual needs of differing cohorts of students at induction to ensure there is adequate support and integration into the School and Department for non-standard students such as mature students and part-time students.
- 15.3 There was dissatisfaction expressed from students with regards to the Personal Tutor system. Levels 2-4 students were happier with advisers of study, and had mixed experiences with their tutors. There was some reluctance, particularly from Level 3 and 4 students to develop a relationship with their tutor given they had an adviser of studies, or other members of academic staff who knew them better. The Panel was mindful of the upcoming changes relating to the Personal Tutor and Advising system and **recommended** the School continue to engage with central activities that are supporting the move from Advising to Personal Tutoring.

- 15.4 Whilst PGR students felt part of the wider community and fully integrated into the School, this was not as evident amongst Postgraduate Taught students. Postgraduate Taught students felt they would also to see student-led seminars used more widely as part of their programmes. The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to integrate Postgraduate Taught students more widely into the School.
- 15.5 Postgraduate Taught students felt they were not exposed to a wide variety of teaching staff. The Panel noted that the student who made the comment is a part time student, however **recommended** that the School ensure Postgraduate Taught students are given the opportunity to experience teaching from a range of staff.
- 15.6 Support staff were very knowledgeable about the university support services available to students and their signposting role in this regard (cross reference 3.7)
- 15.7 Staff mentioned to the Panel that they would like to have a session on dyspraxia and dyslexia. The Panel **recommended** that the School organises this with the Student Support Services in advance of the next academic session.

## **16 Recruitment access and widening participation**

- 16.1 Although the Panel saw student representation from part time and mature students this area was not explored during the review.
- 16.2 Additionally it could be noted that Postgraduate students on the MRes and taught masters felt that their programmes were excellent preparation for undertaking doctoral study.

## **17 QAA quality enhancement engagements**

- 17.1 The Panel noted the documentation provided by the School relating to its engagement with the QAA National Enhancement Themes. This area was not explored further during the review visit.

## **18 Recent developments**

- 18.1 The Panel noted the developments that had taken place since the 2009 Social Science ITR, in particular the cross-disciplinary staff appointments and cross-School initiatives such as the interdisciplinary TR coded courses which were developed as part of the Strategic Investment Fund campaign and indeed the sixth century courses that were housed within the School. In discussion with staff the Panel was pleased to note the positivity in which these courses were held by academics and would encourage the School to consider more activity of this ilk going forward.

## **19 Quality enhancement and good practice**

The Panel notes several areas of good practice within the School as highlighted in this report and as listed by the School in their SED.

The Panel **recommended** the continuation and further dissemination of good practice throughout the School.

## **20 Impediments to quality enhancement**

- 20.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School review its structures to provide greater opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange for dissemination and sharing of ideas and good practice (cross reference section 4.1, 4.2, 6.6 and 6.10).
- 20.2 The lack of engagement with students in formal feedback process such as SCEF and also the lack of engagement with the Class Rep system impedes the School's ability to appropriately review and develop its delivery of teaching. Students indicated they understood the importance of feedback and note that staff cannot be expected to improve course content and delivery if they are not given feedback. As noted in section 7 and 13 the School should continue to encourage participation of students in quality enhancement exercises.

## **21 Issues for discussion with external subject specialists**

Opportunities to discuss discipline specific issues were provided as part of both the formal and informal aspects of the Panel's programme. Where appropriate, School and department specific comments are included in the body of the report.

## **22 Production and approval of self-evaluation document**

- 22.1 It is clear that the production of the SED was a team effort in the School with the Head of School taking ownership of the task. The documentation provided was complete, with additional material requested by the Panel provided in a timely manner.
- 22.2 Several staff contributed to the SED and had the opportunity to comment.
- 22.3 It is not clear whether students had the opportunity to comment and contribute, and the School may wish to consider this in the future.

## **23 CONCLUSIONS**

The Panel wishes to thank all members of staff within the School of Social Sciences for the significant work that went in to the production of the ITR documentation, and for their commitment to the review process. In particular it wished to thank the students and staff the Panel met during the visit. Their candour and willingness to engage with the processes ensured that the event was a successful examination of the work of the School.

The panel recommends **unconditional revalidation**. Where this report makes **recommendations**, the Panel requests that the School provide, as part of its 1-year follow-up report, an overview of what progress has been made and, where the recommendations have not been followed, the School's arguments leading to and justifying this decision.



**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**  
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

PANEL VISIT: TUESDAY 29 AND WEDNESDAY 30 APRIL 2014

This summary is extracted from the full report of the Internal Teaching Review of the School of Social Sciences following the review carried out in April 2014. It includes the Panel's overall impressions of the provision, a record of the Panel's commendations and recommendations, and the Panel's conclusions. Details of the commendations and recommendations can be found in the Final Report.

### **Overall Impressions**

Throughout the two day review the Panel witnessed a School that is collegiate and united in approach to delivering a high quality, research-led student experience. This was not only evident amongst academic staff delivering content to Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students, but also from administrative staff who were enthusiastic about their roles within the School, and who help create a strong support network for staff and students. It was evident throughout the review that all staff are approachable, and that students and staff can turn to one another for support and advice. It was also very clear that Postgraduate Research Students were well integrated into the School, and were being nurtured in their research and careers, with opportunities to teach being invaluable to their development.

### **School Response**

The School remains committed to further fostering and developing a collegiate and supportive culture across all sections of the School. As inferred by the Panel, our work in this regard has had significant positive repercussions for delivering a high quality, research-led student experience. The School is also very pleased to see recognition of our high quality support for Postgraduate students and early career researchers.

Several areas of good practice were recorded from the review and are detailed within the body of this report. The School distinctly operates as three departments, for which there has historically been strong support for maintaining the integrity of the academic disciplines and providing degree programmes with a distinctive disciplinary focus. There are merits of maintaining this system which are explained within the Self Evaluation Document (SED) and were made clear to the Panel throughout the review. Notwithstanding the merits of this organisation of the School the Panel felt that at times it can inhibit cross-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary collaboration and sharing of good practice, which is increasingly encouraged by research funders and is also encouraged in initiatives focused on internationalisation.

### **School Response**

The strengths and weakness of operating on a departmental model are noted, in particular in regard to *inter-disciplinarity, internationalization and sharing good practice*. Though it is already the case that inter-disciplinary work regularly crosses School boundaries (e.g. many researchers in Social Science collaborate with colleagues out-with the School for example on the 6<sup>th</sup> century Sustainability course which involves Education, Social Science and Geography, or Anthropology's interdisciplinary collaboration with Archaeology, History, Language and Literature, Divinity, and practicing artists out-with the university). Moreover, in more recent years the School has moved to foster inter-disciplinarity within the School itself, for example with the introduction of cross School courses, e.g. the *100 Works* course and the TR coded courses linked with the ICTPR. Currently there are two TR coded courses (one each at Levels 3 and 4). The School has recently convened an Internationalization committee, the remit of which is to take forward the School and university internationalization agenda. **Action Plan**. In regard to sharing of good practice – see 6.5 (plus related points).

The School has a very good awareness of the issues and challenges it is facing, and continues to provide an excellent student experience, albeit at some cost in staff time, despite decreased staff numbers and additional load arising from change within the University.

### **School Response**

The School will strive to maintain and foster its effective and supportive collegiate culture; though as noted in the Health and Safety report, stress levels due to pressurised workloads are increasing. It is important to manage this in order to retain staff and, by corollary, continue to deliver the excellent student experience witnessed by the ITR panel.

#### **A. COMMENDABLE FEATURES** *(numbers refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel's full report):*

##### **1 Range of Provision**

1.2 The Panel **commended** the range of provision.

1.3 The Panel **commended** the School's contribution towards the provision of Sixth Century Courses.

##### **3 Staffing**

3.1 The Panel **commended** the School on its positive culture and collegiality amongst academic colleagues. This is echoed by and within the support staff in the School. Staff have created a friendly and supportive environment within the School, which was made evident to the Panel by several of the staff.

3.2 The Panel **commended** the School that despite ongoing difficulties with staffing levels staff contribute to providing an excellent student experience despite the additional workload on staff.

3.5 The Panel **commended** the supportive environment provided for new members of staff.

3.7 The Panel **commended** the engagement between School staff and the Student Support Service and associated services.

3.8 The Panel **commended** the engagement of the support staff in the College Support Staff forum, and their efforts to maximise the opportunity to network and share good practice. The Panel **commended** the School for encouraging support staff to attend University courses for Continuing Professional Development.

3.9 The School ensures there is some capacity in the workload of Teaching Fellows to concentrate on their research, for which the Panel **commended** the School.

##### **5 Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval**

5.1 The Panel **commended** the School encouraging all staff to participate in course and programme design based on their own areas of research.

5.2 The Panel noted that the School actively encouraged new staff to contribute to new course design, and to current courses and the School is to be **commended** for this as it actively engages new staff in disseminating their own research interests.

##### **6 Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

6.1 The Panel **commended** the School for clearly providing programmes at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught levels that meet the learning needs and expectations of students.

- 6.2 The Panel **commended** the School for embedding research-led teaching within all disciplines and within all levels of the curriculum; it was evident from the Panel's meetings with students that students have a sound understanding of this concept.
- 6.3 The Panel **commended** the use of peer review of assessment at Undergraduate and Postgraduate level, and other innovative and meaningful assessments such as requiring students to write their own essay titles in PIR at Postgraduate Taught level.
- 6.4 The Panel **commended** the use of book and journal commentaries as a method of assessment. Student feedback was positive, and it encourages wider reading of key texts. This is an example of best practice within Anthropology which the Panel would **recommend** is disseminated more widely across the School.

### School Response

There are several issues relating to assessment of student work (and the student experience more generally) noted in the ITR panel's report (6.5, 6.6, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14 and 7.5). The School will take the opportunity to review all of these in a special session(s) of the School Teaching and Learning Committee. Subsequent recommendations will be discussed at the School Executive Committee and disseminated to disciplines for appropriate discussion and action. **Action Plan**

- 6.5 Students appreciated the opportunity of submitting draft assignments as an example of formative assessment within Sociology. Students noted that this was becoming more common amongst courses at Level 3 and 4 and would like this type of formative assessment to be rolled out. The Panel **commended** this practice, and encouraged staff to discuss increasing the use of this type of assessment, where appropriate.

### School Response

This will be discussed as detailed in response to 6.4. Though the potential conflict with anonymous marking and difficulties of implementation in courses/disciplines with high student numbers will need careful consideration. One example to be discussed (from student feedback on the ITR report) is peer (student) marked formative essays. **Action Plan**

- 6.6 The Panel **commended** the efforts of staff in providing detailed feedback such as returned essay scripts, but **recommended** that departments seek to ensure consistency should be applied to improve the overall standard of feedback being returned to students.

**School Response.** See 6.4. **Action Plan**

## 7 Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

- 7.1 The Panel **commended** staff who encouraged feedback in methods other than SCEF forms.

**School Response.** Plans to review SSLC may encourage greater participation in the overall reviewing process among students.

## 9 Training and supervision of research students

- 9.1 The Panel was impressed by the level of community spirit amongst the PGR students it met, and **commended** PGR Supervisors on their level of accessibility to students which was highly appreciated by students.

- 9.3 The School was **commended** for its flexibility in allowing new PGR students who had not previously undertaken the MRes programme, to attend those MRes courses they felt would be of help to their studies.
- 9.4 The Panel noted that the School offered various initiatives to help students engage with academia and develop their careers. In Anthropology, participation in the STAR programme was popular and valued highly. Students were very positive about student- led seminars and peer review of dissertation work. All these activities combine to embed a strong research culture within the School and amongst the students for which the School can be **commended**.
- 9.7 The School is to be **commended** for encouraging PGR teaching assistants to utilise their own research in their tutorial delivery and noted that this is appreciated by the Undergraduate students who felt it brought greater context to the more theoretical aspects of courses.

## **12 Staff Training and Educational Development**

- 12.4 It was noted from the SED that some staff had taken the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching and Learning and are encouraged to participate. The Panel **commended** the School on this.
- 12.5 The Panel **commended** the School on the opportunity and encouragement given to support staff as well as academic staff to undertake CPD (cross reference to 3.8).
- 12.8 The Panel **commended** the School on the Tutor Training Manual.

## **15 Student support, retention and progression**

- 15.1 It was apparent throughout the review that the level of support from all staff in the School to students is exemplary. From the small sample of students interviewed the Panel felt confident **commending** the disability provisions within the School; student feedback in this regard was excellent.

### **School Response**

The School will ensure that tutors are fully apprised of the disability needs of the students in their classes.

### **Action Plan**

## **16 Recruitment access and widening participation**

- 16.2 The Panel noted that Postgraduate students on the MRes and taught masters felt that their programmes were excellent preparation for undertaking doctoral study.

### **School Response**

In response to student feedback on the report, the School will ensure that PGT students get early information about opportunities for PhD study (research councils, opportunities for study at Aberdeen and elsewhere). **Action Plan**

## **17 QAA quality enhancement engagements**

- 17.1 The Panel noted the documentation provided by the School relating to its engagement with the QAA National Enhancement Themes. This area was not explored further during the review visit.

## **18 Recent developments**

- 18.1 The Panel noted the developments that had taken place since the 2009 Social Science ITR, in particular the cross-disciplinary staff appointments and cross-School initiatives such as the

interdisciplinary TR coded courses which were developed as part of the Strategic Investment Fund campaign and indeed the sixth century courses that were housed within the School. In discussion with staff the Panel was pleased to note the positivity in which these courses were held by academics and would encourage the School to consider more activity of this ilk going forward.

## 19 Quality enhancement and good practice

The Panel notes several areas of good practice within the School as highlighted in this report and as listed by the School in their SED.

## 21 Issues for discussion with external subject specialists

Opportunities to discuss discipline specific issues were provided as part of both the formal and informal aspects of the Panel's programme. Where appropriate, School and department specific comments are included in the body of the report.

## 22 Production and approval of self-evaluation document

22.1 It is clear that the production of the SED was a team effort in the School with the Head of School taking ownership of the task. The documentation provided was complete, with additional material requested by the Panel provided in a timely manner.

22.2 Several staff contributed to the SED and had the opportunity to comment.

## B. RECOMMENDATIONS *(Numbers refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel's full report):*

### 3 Staffing

3.6 The Panel **recommended** that (i) the workload model is brought to completion in all departments and (ii) that there is a satisfactory level of transparency of the workload criteria.

### School Response

The workload model has now been brought to completion in all three departments and disseminated to staff. Workload models are subject to frequent review and in the future this will involve further consideration of the requirements of the FAE in CASS. The issue of adequate transparency will be addressed in the course of these reviews.

### 4 School Organisation

4.1 The Panel **recommended** the School looks at the fora available for communication of best practice within and across departments. Cross fertilisation within the School will help increase innovative practices and potentially reduce workload and increase staff morale.

### School Response

The School's Teaching and Learning (T&L) and Recruitment and Experience (SREC) Committees are the main fora at which matters of good practice relating to teaching are discussed. Each Committee reports to the School Executive and recommendations are disseminated via Heads of Departments to their respective disciplines. It is a little unclear what 'cross-fertilisation' across the School means here; though the School will aim to ensure that more regular School forums are held which will attend to issues of good practice around teaching and communication of these, which includes attention to good communication to students of changes that will affect them. **Action Plan** It has been noted in the ITR report that problems with morale tend to be associated with initiatives out-with the School's control.

- 4.2 The Panel **recommended** that the School undertakes a review of its Committee structure with a view to streamlining the structure, improving the flow of information, reducing workload and enabling a more strategic approach to strategic goals and activities. The Panel suggested that this includes discussion on how to engage more effectively with the College strategic plans to provide empowerment to staff within the School, ensuring that staff are aware of ongoing planning initiatives.

#### School Response

The current structure of School committees was introduced some 6 or so years ago for several reasons including: (i) dealing more effectively with the increasing, and increasingly diverse administrative requirements and College/University initiatives, (ii) to better share the increasing burden of duties and requirements, and (iii) to help ensure that decision making in the School was shared by a diverse range of people. Since that time there has been an increase in the work required of the School suggesting any reduction or streamlining of Committees would be unhelpful. However a review of communication and dissemination will be undertaken. Moreover, there will be an explicit commitment to ensure that decision and policy-making bodies in the School are in line with the requirements of equality and diversity and to pay attention to increasing empowerment to staff in the School. **Action Plan**

### 5 Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval

- 5.3 The Panel was impressed with the breadth of courses offered across the School, and students appreciated the opportunities made available to them. The Panel was sympathetic to the fact that occasionally unforeseen circumstances will result in course choices being limited, however the Panel **recommended** that forward planning of teaching is as thorough as possible and further **recommended** there is detailed communication to students of course opportunities available to them over their two honours years.

#### School Response

With the launch of OneSource in the autumn term of 2014, and the termination of Student Advising, responsibility for such communication will pass to Registry. The School is confident that plans are in place to ensure that students are adequately informed regarding their course options. Attention will be paid to ensuring students are informed quickly of any unforeseen changes to help stem anxiety. **Action Plan**

### 6 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

- 6.4 The Panel **commended** the use of book and journal commentaries as a method of assessment. Student feedback was positive, and it encourages wider reading of key texts. This is an example of best practice within Anthropology which the Panel would **recommend** is disseminated more widely across the School.

#### School Response

There are several issues relating to assessment of student work noted in the ITR panel's report (6.5, 6.6, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14 and 7.5). The School will take the opportunity to review all of these in a special session of the School Teaching and Learning Committee. Subsequent recommendations will be discussed at the School Executive Committee and disseminated to disciplines for appropriate discussion and action. **Action Plan**

- 6.6 The Panel **commended** the efforts of staff in providing detailed feedback such as returned essay scripts, but **recommended** that departments seek to ensure consistency should be applied to improve the overall standard of feedback being returned to students.

**School Response.** See 6.4. **Action Plan**

6.8 Students would like to receive feedback from their exams. As this is institutional policy, the Panel **recommended** that the School ensure policies on feedback on examinations are made more visible to staff and students.

**School Response.** We will ensure these policies are clarified and communicated. **Action Plan**

6.10 The Panel noted that Anthropology provides excellent preparation to Undergraduate students for their dissertations, particularly the preparatory work carried out in level 3. The Panel **recommended** that this best practice is disseminated, particularly to PIR who are considering revising their research methods training at level 3.

#### **School Response**

This element of best practice is not easily transferable given the difference in student numbers (lower in Anthropology than in PIR. There were 144 dissertations in PIR 2013-14 and 20 [projects/independent study] in Anthropology) and that the Anthropology dissertation is 45 credits whereas PIR is 30 credits. However, a review of dissertation provision specifically for PIR is underway and some elements of this best practice will be incorporated in the new 'Researching the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' course to be introduced in 2015-16 in PIR. **Action Plan**

6.12 The Panel **recommended** that the intention of the School to embed diversity and internationalisation within the curriculum be clearly visible to all students.

#### **School Response**

In regard to assessment (see main report) the issue of different learning outcomes and forms of assessment for PG and Level 3 students taught in the same course is to be reviewed (See 6.4). **Action Plan**

In regard to embedding diversity and internationalisation in the curriculum, this appears to be related to one student who felt some courses in PIR were overly Anglo-American. At one level this does reflect the conventional history of the discipline (specifically IR theory); though there are currently courses available on Japan, Russia, Middle East and Latin America in PIR. Moreover, there is an international mix of students and staff which helps to embed diverse approaches to and thinking about topics and issues. With the current review of the teaching programme in PIR, along with the new appointments, diversity of subject matter, materials and sources will be reviewed as well as more effectively communicating to students the Schools' work on embedding diversity and internationalisation in the curriculum. **Action Plan**

There is an opportunity to consider the broader issue of embedding diversity in the curriculum given the importance the University places on equality and diversity as well as the School's potential future application for a *Gender Equality Charter Mark* award. **Action Plan**

6.13 The Panel **recommended** that the School review and enhance the teaching methods used in tutorials, particular with regards to the use and purpose of presentations; ensuring students received feedback from these presentations.

**School Response** See 6.4 **Action Plan (Though this is also resource issue)**

6.14 It is **recommended** that a monitoring system is put in place to monitor the use of tutors who lack experience and confidence.

**School Response** See 6.4 **Action Plan (Though this is also a resource issue)**

6.16 The Panel **recommended** that the administration surrounding the capping of courses is reviewed.

#### **School Response**

Honours courses will now be capped via the OneSource system. **Action Plan**



## 7 Course and Programme Monitoring and Review

- 7.3 Students expressed their dissatisfaction at the low completion rates from SCEF and how students fail to engage with the process, and fail to realise the importance of completing them. Staff are also concerned about low SCEF response rates. The Panel **recommended** that the School continues to encourage students to engage with the system.

### School Response

The School will continue to encourage students to engage with the SCEF system. We will consider allowing students time to complete SCEF via phone or laptop in the last tutorial. The School (especially via the DoTL) has persistently lobbied various University fora for assistance in improving response rates as this appears to be a system fault.

- 7.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School consider holding SSLs at different levels to make the discussion more meaningful for all concerned.

### School Response

To consider this. **Action Plan**

## 9 Training and supervision of research students

- 9.6 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to remind Postgraduate taught and research students of the support services regarding English Language that are available across the University.

### School Response

Content to continue to remind students to make use of these services, though it has been reported by the PG team that sometimes the courses do not run, or there are not sufficient places. We will feed this back to the College. **Action Plan**

## 10 Personal development and employability

- 10.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School continue with current initiatives with regards to employability and personal development and continue to educate staff and students on the activities offered, such as the Attractive Prospects event which ran in 2013.

### School Response

Content to continue with this. **Action Plan**

- 10.2 The Panel **recommended** that the School engages further with and utilises alumni and develops its links with the Careers service to develop opportunities and activities within the School.

### School Response

Efforts have increased in the School to work with the Careers Service and the Alumni office (via Dr Bennie – Director of SREC in particular). Going forward the School is committed to regular meetings with both and making more of an effort to develop ‘joined-up’ approaches. The Employability plan was developed with these objectives in mind. **Action Plan**

On the Attractive Prospects Event, note that this also took place in 2014 (the documents states 2013).

This will be reviewed by SREC. **Action Plan**

- 10.3 The Panel **recommends** that the School engages with the College level MA Advisory Board to look further at the opportunity of engaging with external companies and organisations.



### School Response

To investigate the opportunities. **Action Plan**

## 12 Staff Training and Educational Development

- 12.1 The Panel **recommended** that a forum to share and discuss ideas be created within the School, across departments.

### School Response

It isn't clear what 'ideas' refers to here. Rather than proliferate forums, we will ensure that more regular School forums take place at which ideas around good teaching practice can be shared. See 4.1. **Action Plan**

- 12.2 The Panel **recommended** that staff be encouraged to engage and participate with the Network of Teaching Fellows at the University to share ideas of best practice in innovation of teaching and assessment, in terms of delivery not just content (cross reference 3.9).

### School Response

Will take this forward. **Action Plan**

- 12.7 The Panel **recommended** that the School review and enhance teaching methods in tutorials, particularly at sub honours. Students felt there were too many presentations to prepare for, which in turn received little feedback if any; students were not appreciative of the skills and attributes such activities could develop. The Panel **recommended** that this is addressed as part of enhanced tutor training. Training should be reviewed for tutors to ensure they can offer and facilitate a range of teaching and learning activities in tutorials.

### School Response

We will review our tutor training, though resources to do this are constrained. **Action Plan**

## 13 Student involvement in quality processes

- 13.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School continues to work with the Students' Association to implement the Class Rep system, and considers new ways in which staff could actively engage students in their role. The Panel was mindful that this also requires the engagement from the students.

### School Response

Content to continue.

- 13.4 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to gain student representation on the Student Experience Committee.

### School Response

SREC to take this forward. **Action Plan**

## 15 Student support, retention and progression

- 15.2 Panel **recommended** that departments consider the individual needs of differing cohorts of students at induction to ensure there is adequate support and integration into the School and Department for non-standard students such as mature students and part-time students.

### School Response

This has been part of the discussion with the Principal and Peter McGeorge that PIR HoD (Bain) and Director of SREC (Bennie) have been party to regarding retention issues. Indications are that a 'traffic light' system will be introduced as institutional policy. **Action Plan**

15.3 The Panel was mindful of the upcoming changes relating to the Personal Tutor and Advising system and **recommended** the School continue to engage with central activities that are supporting the move from Advising to Personal Tutoring.

#### School Response

Content to continue.

15.4 The Panel **recommended** that the School seek to integrate Postgraduate Taught students more widely into the School.

#### School Response

To be discussed by the School PG Team and SEC (in consultation with PGT students). **Action Plan**

15.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School ensure Postgraduate Taught students are given the opportunity to experience teaching from a range of staff.

#### School Response.

This appears to relate to one student in Anthropology. The situation will be reviewed. **Action Plan**

15.7 Staff mentioned to the Panel that they would like to have a session on dyspraxia and dyslexia. The Panel **recommended** that the School organises this with the Student Support Services in advance of the next academic session.

#### School Response. Will organise. **Action Plan**

### 19 Quality enhancement and good practice

The Panel **recommended** the continuation and further dissemination of good practice throughout the School.

#### School Response

See various responses above.

### 20 Impediments to quality enhancement

20.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School review its structures to provide greater opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange for dissemination and sharing of ideas and good practice (cross reference section 4.1, 4.2, 6.6 and 6.10).

#### School Response

See responses to 4.1, 4.2, 6.6 and 6.10 above. All appear on the **Action Plan**.

20.2 The lack of engagement with students in formal feedback process such as SCEF and also the lack of engagement with the Class Rep system impedes the School's ability to appropriately review and develop its delivery of teaching. Students indicated they understood the importance of feedback and note that staff cannot be expected to improve course content and delivery if they are not given feedback. As noted in section 7 and 13 the School should continue to encourage participation of students in quality enhancement exercises.

#### School Response

The School will continue to encourage students to engage with the SCEF system. We will consider allowing students time to complete SCEF via phone or laptop in the last tutorial. The School (especially via the DoTL) has persistently lobbied various fora for assistance in improving response rates.

## **21 Issues for discussion with external subject specialists**

Opportunities to discuss discipline specific issues were provided as part of both the formal and informal aspects of the Panel's programme. Where appropriate, School and department specific comments are included in the body of the report.

## **22 Production and approval of self-evaluation document**

22.3 It is not clear whether students had the opportunity to comment and contribute, and the School may wish to consider this in the future.

### **School Response**

As mentioned in the SED, students were invited to a meeting to discuss the SED. They have also been invited to consult and discuss the School's response.

## **23 CONCLUSIONS**

The panel recommends **unconditional revalidation**. Where this report makes **recommendations**, the Panel requests that the School provide, as part of its 1-year follow-up report, an overview of what progress has been made and, where the recommendations have not been followed, the School's arguments leading to and justifying this decision.

## SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE ITR ACTION PLAN (AUGUST 2014)

	Objective	Action	Responsibility of:	Timeframe
Overall impressions	Further develop inter-disciplinarity and internationalization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support development of cross School courses e.g. TR coded courses at both UG and PG level; also the proposed MSC in Emerging Global Challenges</li> <li>2. Develop work of School internationalization committee</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. HoS, HoDs, Dir PG Studies, Programme Director</li> <li>2. HoS, Internationalisation c'tee</li> </ol>	On-going from 2014-15
A 6.4	Consider wider use of book/journal commentary as assessment.	<p>Several issues relating to assessment of student work was noted in the ITR panel's report <b>(6.5, 6.6, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14)</b>. The School will take the opportunity to review all of these in a special session(s) of the School Teaching and Learning Committee. Subsequent recommendations will be discussed at the SEC and disseminated to disciplines for appropriate discussion and action.</p>	DOTL, HoS, SEC	Meetings in autumn 2014-15
A 15.1	Better communication around disability for tutors	Ensure tutors are fully apprised of disability needs of students in their classes	Disability Officer and supporting secretary	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
A 16.2	Early information for PGT students about opportunities of PhD study (research councils, opportunities for study at Aberdeen and elsewhere).	Consider a formal lecture for all PGT students in Semester 1 with appropriate information	Dir PG Studies, HoS, SEC	To consider for Semester 1 2014-15

B 4.1	To look at fora used to communicate best practise across the School	School will aim to ensure that more regular School forums are held which will attend to issues of good practice around teaching and communication of these. We will ensure these policies are clarified and communicated. This issue will also be discussed at the special meetings of the School T&L c'tee (see 6.4)	HoS, SAO, HoDs, DOTL	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 4.2	Review School Committee structure	Review of communication and dissemination will be undertaken. Will be an explicit commitment to ensure that decision and policy-making bodies in the School are in line with the requirements of Equality and Diversity and pay attention to increased empowerment of staff.	HoS, SEC, E&D Advisor	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 5.3	Forward planning of teaching and associated communication to students the course opportunities available to them over their two honours years.	The School will review the current teaching planning schedule to enable inclusion of Honours options for both years of the student Honours programme instead of just one. And also review current practices of communicating Honours course choices to student which may include running information sessions in the HS2 to help publicise Honours options.  Efforts will be made to ensure that Personal Tutors are made aware of the range of options available to	HoDs, SAO, PTs	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)

		Honours students.		
B 6.8	In accordance with institutional policy ensure policies on feedback on examinations are made more visible to staff and students.	Ensure both staff and students know they can contact course co-ordinators for feedback on exam performance.	HoD	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 6.10	Disseminate Anthropology best practice for dissertation preparation across the School (esp PIR)	Not easily transferable given difference in student numbers ( <b>144</b> dissertations in PIR 2013-14 and <b>20</b> [projects/independent study] in Anthropology) and that the Anthropology dissertation is <b>45</b> credits whereas PIR is <b>30</b> credits. However, a review of dissertation provision specifically for PIR is underway and some elements of this best practice will be incorporated in the new 'Researching the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century' course to be introduced in 2015-16 in PIR.	HoD PIR, HoS	Review ongoing 2014-15. Restructured PIR programme 2015-16
B 6.12	To embed diversity and internationalisation within the curriculum and make this more clearly visible to all students.	To review ways to better embed diversity and internationalisation within the curriculum and to communicate this effectively to students. To begin planning for application for Gender Equality Charter Mark	HoS, SEC, E&D Advisor	HoS meet with AUSA President for Societies and Student Activities August/Sept 2014. Ongoing discussions 2014-15 (SEC)
B 6.13	To review tutorial teaching methods especially around presentations	See 6.4. (Though note resourcing issue). Consider, for example, replacing presentations (or some) with enhanced student participation e.g. students 'taking a leading role for small parts of the	See 6.4	See 6.4.

		tutorial) on a tutorial question for example. Encourage innovative student engagement (videos, quizzes, board games, wordsearches etc)		
B 6.14	To review monitoring of tutors.	See 6.4. (Though note resourcing issue). Additional actions to consider: (i) ensure tutors receive guidelines on how to give feedback (and what feedback is); (ii) Introduce mandatory meetings with course coordinator at certain points during the term to discuss progress and/or any problems; (iii) Course coordinator to drop into the occasional class whilst in progress.	See 6.4.	See 6.4
B 6.16	Review of the administration surrounding the capping of courses.	Review procedures if courses become oversubscribed.	STLC, SEC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 7.5	Review SSLC meetings for different levels.	See 6.4	See 6.4	See 6.4
B 9.6	To make sure PGT students are aware of support services re English Language	The School will seek to remind Postgraduate taught and research students of the support services regarding English Language that are available across the University.	PGT Team Also feedback to College	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 10.1	Continue with current initiatives with regards to employability and personal development and continue to educate staff and students on the activities offered.	To ensure students are aware of the wide range of opportunities e.g. BP student tutoring scheme: <a href="http://www.abdn.ac.uk/careers/co-">http://www.abdn.ac.uk/careers/co-</a>	STLC, SRE, SEC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)

		<a href="#">curriculum/bpscheme/</a> and the Saltire Foundation <a href="http://www.saltirefoundation.com/">http://www.saltirefoundation.com/</a>		
B 10.2	To further engage with alumni and develops links with the Careers service to develop opportunities and activities within the School.	Special meeting of SREC to take this forward.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SREC</li> <li>2. Alumni Office – to provide updated contact details for alumni who graduated 5, 10, 15 years ago.</li> <li>3. Liaise with PIR Society who is developing an alumni group</li> </ol>	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 10.3	To engage with the College level MA Advisory Board to look further at the opportunity of engaging with external companies and organisations.	Activate any opportunities to engage with external companies and organisations. Encourage active engagement with the Programme Advisory Board by student reps.	SEC, HoS	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 12.1	Develop forums to share cross School ideas	Schedule more regular School forums. Consider more regular staff-student forums	SEC, HoS	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)



B 12.2	Develop better engagement with Network of Teaching Fellows	Encourage engagement with Network of Teaching Fellows at the University to share ideas of best practice	HoDs	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 12.7	Enhance teaching at tutorial level especially at sub-honours	Review teaching methods in tutorials, particularly at sub honours.	SREC, SEC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 13.4	Student representation on the Student Experience Committee.	SREC to take this forward	SREC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 15.2	Consider the individual needs of differing cohorts of students at induction to ensure adequate support and integration.	Review if the School can do more, for example, through MyAberdeen to make sure part-time students etc feel integrated on courses.	STLC, SREC & SEC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 15.4	To integrate Postgraduate Taught students more widely into the School.	To be discussed by the School PG Team and SEC (in consultation with PGT students). Potential for a big early event in S1 for all PG students.	PG Team, SEC	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 15.5	Ensure PGT students are given the opportunity to experience teaching from a range of staff.	This appears to relate to one student in Anthropology. The situation will be reviewed.	HoD Anth	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 15.7	To improve staff knowledge of dyspraxia and dyslexia.	To organise sessions.	SAO	With immediate effect (for semester 1 2014-15)
B 20	To review structures to provide greater opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange for dissemination and sharing of ideas and good practice.	See 4.1, 4.2, 6.6 and 6.10		



UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE  
**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW FINAL REPORT OF THE PANEL  
AND SCHOOL RESPONSE**

Date: 02 September 2014

School: School of Social Science, College of Arts and Social Sciences

**ATTACHED:**

Final Report

School Response

Other  please specify: N/A

**OUTCOME OF PANEL VISIT:**

Revalidation Recommended

Revalidation Not Recommended

Other  please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE RESPONSE:**

The Committee would like to extend their thanks to the Head of School, Director of Teaching and the School as a whole for the response provided to the ITR report. The Committee were very grateful for the responses provided.

Members of the Committee noted the somewhat disparate nature of the school's disciplines but also that of both a research-led teaching environment and very strong student engagement. The Committee noted some conflict in the approach to dissertation supervision but was heartened by the actions as laid out in the attached plan.

The Committee were pleased to note the School's detailed Action plan which highlighted areas for development and timeframe for completion. The Committee were particularly encouraged to note a review of the teaching planning schedule, with the aim of giving students more information about their choices over the 2 Honours years, and the review of procedures around the capping of Honours courses.

The Committee were also encouraged by the variety of ways that the School proposes to enhance the quality of their teaching, from encouraging engagement with the Teaching Fellows network to their review of both sub-Honours tutorial provision and the mechanisms/structures they use to enable dissemination of good practice.

Overall, the Committee were encouraged by the report provided and look forward to the one year follow up report.

**Date: 21 October 2014**

**School's One-year Follow-up Due: 1 September 2015**

School Response Received:	01 September 2014
Submitted to QAC:	02 September 2014
Considered by QAC:	24 September 2014
QAC Response forwarded to School:	22 October 2014
Webpages updated:	22 October 2014