

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE
INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW (ITR)
SCHOOL OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES
Panel Visit: 13 and 14 March 2024

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Internal Teaching Review (ITR) of the School of Biological Sciences was carried out under the University's published process and procedures for ITR which are available here: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/internal-teaching-review-6112.php>. This ITR took place in person and was held over the course of two days.
- 1.2 The School was asked to submit a streamlined Critical Analysis document which addressed the following key areas:
- (i) School context: to include student numbers, demographics and outcomes; highlight any areas of teaching and learning practices that are specific to the School and a summary of the School's response to the previous ITR;
 - (ii) Positive aspects of the School's teaching and learning: to include examples of positive practice and particular strengths of the School as well as how this good practice is shared both within the School and beyond;
 - (iii) Challenges that have been encountered in the School's teaching and learning provision: to include potential areas identified for improvement and an action plan for how they might be addressed – or whether these were issues for discussion at the ITR; and,
 - (iv) Future plans: to include areas for development in the next few years, e.g. new course/programme developments, partnerships proposed.
- 1.3 The ITR Panel was comprised of:
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| Faye Hendry | Chair
School of Education
Quality Assurance Committee |
| Mark Grant | School of Natural and Computing Sciences
Quality Assurance Committee |
| Euan Bain | School of Engineering
University Education Committee |
| Rhiannon Ledwell | Vice-President for Education, AUSA
Quality Assurance Committee |
| Andrew McGowan | External Subject Specialist, University of Exeter |
| Sarah Greenwood | External Subject Specialist, University of Stirling |
| Christopher Miller | Clerk, Academic Services |

- 1.4 The Panel considered the documentation provided by the School, by way of an evidence-based Critical Analysis (CA) as detailed in 1.2 above. In addition, prior to the virtual visit to the School, members of the Panel were provided with access to the School's Quality Assurance (QA) repository, containing the School's annual monitoring materials (Annual Course and Annual Programme Reviews (ACR and APR)), Course Feedback Forms, minutes from meetings of Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLC), and External Examiner Reports (EERs), as well as the minutes from various School Committees. Consideration of this documentation, along with the School's submitted CA, enabled the Panel to identify key themes for further exploration.
- 1.5 The Panel conducted a visit to the School, where they met with a range of staff and students.
- 1.6 The themes for focused discussion agreed with the School prior to and during the visit were:
- (i) **Staffing and Development**, particularly in terms of opportunities for staff development and the impacts of staffing on course and programme provision, as well as what the School is currently doing in relation to marketing and recruitment.
 - (ii) **UG and PGT Learning and Teaching**, including the facilities available to the School, the impact of block teaching on both staff and students, how the School manages project supervision and what impact this has on students, and how the School helps facilitate the integration of skills into courses.
 - (iii) **Assessment and Feedback**, particularly focusing on the School's marking, moderation and feedback processes, the School's assessment range and how they support the students in this regard, the impact of AI upon assessment design and formative assessment opportunities.
 - (iv) **Student Experience, Student Feedback and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)** encapsulating the capturing and closing off of student feedback and how the School supports EDI.
 - (v) **Work-based Learning, Employability and Careers**, including the use of fieldwork courses within the School, the value they hold to the School and how the School works with the Careers Service and Employability Colleagues to build skills and employment opportunities.
 - (vi) **PGR Training and Support**, focusing on how the School aims to build its PGR community, what pastoral support is in place for PGR students and what the School is doing in response to the identified disparity in training for those funded through DPTs and those who are not.
- 1.7 This report is split into three sections:
- (i) Part A gives the overall impressions of the teaching provision within the School, formed from the whole ITR process;
 - (ii) Part B covers the outcome of various meetings with staff and students, focusing on a small number of themes as outlined above. It also details the Pedagogic Partnership Session, which involved more free-form discussion; and
 - (iii) Part C details the School action plan which will form the basis of the annual follow-up reports.

PART A: OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

- 2.1 The panel was impressed by the School's dedication to its students. It was evident throughout the review that staff have a fantastic working relationship with their students, ensuring they are seen as an approachable means of support for a range of both academic and non-academic issues that their students face. Students feel empowered to provide feedback and have been provided with multiple avenues to do so. Relationships between students and personal tutors appear to be very productive and staff clearly care about education.
- 2.2 Assessments were another area of strength identified by the panel. There were a diverse range of assessments across all levels and programmes, challenging students to apply their subject knowledge through robust problem-solving approaches. The Staff took pride in their ability to design assessments that took student provisions into consideration whilst tackling the challenge of Artificial Intelligence (AI) without compromising high academic standards and fairness.
- 2.3 Administrative and technical staff were praised by students and staff alike. Institutional and School administration processes appear to have been followed rigorously whilst ensuring minimal impacts to student learning experiences. Technicians were described as always on-hand, consistent and knowledgeable; allowing for students to feel supported during practical sessions.
- 2.4 Employability and field-based learning is of great importance to the School. The value of such opportunities was understood by staff at all levels and had been clearly relayed to the students. Despite the ongoing financial difficulties faced by the institution, the School continues to provide a diverse array of field-based courses. Whilst it is understood that changes are being made to the careers advisory staff due to retirement, it is hoped that the School will continue to work alongside the careers service to promote employability to their students.
- 2.5 Block teaching (five to six week taught courses) continues to provide mixed results in terms of student performance and experience. The School should continue the good practice of considering the impact of block teaching on students and how to balance this. The School currently offers different learning opportunities to students, ensuring that courses that do not adapt well to the block-teaching method are delivered via an alternative teaching structure. The School should also continue to consider how to assist students who miss classes, as the block-taught courses create a much more challenging learning environment to catch up in such instances.

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

3.1 Staffing and Development

- 3.1.1 The School clearly values its staff and highlighted that it adopts a positive and encouraging approach to staff development. The School explained that they enabled staff development through a number of methods, including: (i) encouraging staff to make full use of the Centre for Academic Development (CAD)'s training courses; (ii) small discretionary loans were provided to support some work; (iii) away days are used with targeted themes, such as having a speaker on AI; (iv) internal workshops, such as a taught student project discussion session. The School also noted that PGR supervisor training was done in-house and in conjunction with

the Postgraduate Research School (PGRS) for experiential sharing. The School also encourages academic line managers whilst ensuring that no one oversees more than six people at one time. The School also encourages membership of higher education committees amongst their staff. This approach clearly produced positive results amongst staff members, who praised the School as being well structured, supportive of them within their roles, good at collaborating with other Schools and directorates and is clear in their communications to staff.

- 3.1.2 Staff noted that, due to both financial and time constraints, much of the development offered to them was in the form of free in-house courses. Support staff did acknowledge that time off was granted on occasions for development but that this was more difficult during term time. Staff noted that they were always encouraged to undertake funded training and that the School was positive towards their continued development. When asked if there was any training that the research technicians felt they required access to, staff explained that training for specific equipment was catered for when essential. They would also use visits to their labs from external experts as opportunities for learning and development, where possible.
- 3.1.3 The School highlighted growing concerns over shrinking staffing numbers hindering their ability to successfully deliver programmes. The School noted that they have lost a third of their staff, both academic and support, over a period of 18 months and that current staff were dealing with heavy workloads as a result of this. It was noted that, despite a diverse range of courses available for levels three and four, the School is now in a position where it is not able to appoint staff to teach specialisations unless it fits within their set curriculum. Support staff detailed that many junior graded professional staff would leave due to promotion opportunities becoming available elsewhere but acknowledged that the academic staff were understanding and would help them where possible. The School also acknowledged the struggle to retain junior graded professional staff, noting that they ensured that their team was always well trained regardless, as they recognised the importance of an effective administration team.
- 3.1.4 It was noted that the School had become increasingly reliant on post-doctoral staff for the successful delivery of teaching. PhD students were also recruited from research grants. Whilst the School acknowledged that many of these individuals were excellent teachers, it was highlighted that this would not be sustainable for the School. The School indicated that, for their School size, there are a large number of scholarship staff.

3.2 UG and PGT Learning and Teaching

- 3.2.1 The School emphasised that they had a lack of suitable teaching facilities, particularly in relation to large computing classrooms. Staff explained that they had hoped to use more group work within their classes but could not get access to appropriate rooms regularly enough to facilitate this on a more consistent basis. Assessments for larger cohorts would often have to be split over several smaller computer classrooms which in turn would strain staff resources. It was noted by the School that the teaching of statistics was far easier during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown than on campus because of inadequate facilities. Staff argued that whilst there was room for flexible teaching within a two-hour block, student and staff interaction was often limited and constrained by the quality of (and access to) suitable teaching spaces. Even in instances where rooms were provided, they often contained faults. Zoology G9-G11 was highlighted as containing many broken computers as well as a faulty projector. It was also noted that the PGR students lacked a comfortable community space.

The post graduate students confirmed that their space within the Cruickshank building was often too cold and contained little private space for meetings.

- 3.2.2 Many academic and technician staff held the Science Teaching Hub (STH) in very high regard as an effective learning tool at the School's disposal, describing the facility as a wonderful teaching space and a positive experience. It was also noted that the Science Teaching Hub operated separately in terms of timetabling at no detriment to technical and admin teams. Staff felt that the facilities within STH were accommodating of students due to having wheelchair access, disability lifts and an assistance dog. Despite this, students felt that the learning environment of STH was not always suitable, particularly for neurodivergent students. The spaces often contained two or three classes running alongside simultaneously, with a clip-on earpiece provided to students so that they could listen to the appropriate lecturer. This created a learning environment whereby students felt over stimulated and often easily distracted. Some courses mentioned were BI1009 and BI1511. It was suggested that some form of visual separation between different classrooms would assist with this. Students did admit that these concerns are often shared anecdotally, and it would be beneficial if students used formal feedback mechanisms to raise issues. The students did, however, generally agree that the facilities, particularly the technologies, within STH were superior to those used previously in the Zoology labs. Academic staff agreed that the transition to STH has not enhanced student experience in the way that they would have liked. It was noted that in some extreme instances students have had panic attacks during the multi-class sessions in STH.
- 3.2.3 Staff held a neutral view with regards to block teaching, recognising that it was beneficial for many subjects but not all. The structured nature of these courses mean that staff can tailor research around the demands of teaching time. It was also noted that field work often needed to be blocked due to its nature. Staff considered that block teaching was more beneficial for students as students could use block teaching to build their own study paths, as well as build the necessary skills that students felt they needed individually. Staff also notified students ahead of time regarding assessments and pinch times within these courses.
- 3.2.4 Students generally preferred block teaching as a means of learning. On the one hand, students noted that block teaching courses could be intense. On the other hand, students claimed to enjoy the focused learning provided by block teaching. Students also echoed staff in praising block teaching, for it helped enable them to choose topics related to courses in which they had greater interest. One negative that was highlighted by both staff and students was that, due to the shorter and more intense nature of block teaching, absences caused greater stress regarding catch-up and meeting course learning outcomes. It was also agreed amongst students and staff that block teaching created complications in relation to interdisciplinary study options, but that staff try to accommodate the small number of requests for timetabled courses from outwith the School as far as possible. Students also mentioned that they would like to see more of a throughline in subsequent blocks, with opportunities to carry the skills they have learned forward.
- 3.2.5 Staff noted the use of prerecorded lectures only as a subsidy for in-person lectures due to staff absence except within online/blended courses. All lectures are still recorded and uploaded for students to access. Students explained that they appreciated the flexibility of this approach as they all had different preferred learning methods.

3.2.6 With regards to Honours projects, students agreed that the projects list was extensive, but were informed by academic staff that some of the projects listed were unavailable as they had been left on the list from the previous year, and others were perceived as being outwith student's preferred areas of study. In general, students felt that some subject specialisms were not realistic options due to a lack of available supervisors for the topics on offer but were grateful to be able to propose their own topic. Students also noted a discrepancy in the level of supervision being received during their projects and that many students failed to get projects that interested them due to a lack of engagement on the part of potential supervisors. Staff acknowledged that the current system is reliant on academic staff being proactive in reaching out to students to set up project meetings to help determine supervision. However, they wanted to allow for this system so that both supervisor and student had the opportunity to discuss with one another before locking in a project. Block teaching also presents a conflict within this system as some supervisors are overseas during project selection. It was clarified to the panel that this system is currently under review.

3.3 Assessment and Feedback

3.3.1 With regards to marking and moderation processes, the School noted that all student assessments were submitted online. Administration staff confirmed that the School was following institutional procedures. The School praised the virtual learning environment (VLE), claiming that it removed paperwork, allowed for greater tracking of student progression and allowed exam grading to be more easily uniformed and centralised. However, it was noted that the VLE, in its current form, does not always allow for anonymous marking. It was also noted that Turnitin was sometimes inefficient for use with large cohorts due to the way that it presents information.

3.3.2 Support staff were asked how they handle submissions and how they interact with academic staff to ensure that the correct processes are being followed. Staff noted that they set deadlines on their calendar which are confirmed by all course coordinators. All staff are active in their use of MyAberdeen and set submission links. These submissions are checked on deadline days and, after one day has passed, course coordinators will be informed of late submissions. C6s may be issued after seven days of no submission where no extensions have been agreed upon. Staff appear to be content with the systems being used in VLE.

3.3.3 Students were extremely positive regarding the range and diversity of assessments being provided to them within their programmes. Assessment types could vary from course to course, but the topical diversity was helpful for students as they found that they were engaging more because of the diverse assessment types, such as infographics, videos, panels, essays, slideshows, and problem-solving exercises. Students commented that course coordinators within the School should be applauded for their creativity in engagement with scientific writing. Students also mentioned that they preferred having courses contain smaller, more frequent assessment as it somewhat alleviated the stress of having a major final exam. It was also discussed if students felt they were being over-assessed within their block courses, however students felt that this was generally a non-issue. The students' only area of concern related to some smaller assessments that they felt appeared too early into the block courses, as they argued that they had not yet had an adequate amount of time to settle into their new courses. It was admitted, however, that usually these assessments were not designed to be too difficult.

- 3.3.4 The School noted that despite previously attempting a shift away from traditional assessment types, including many online assessments, the aim moving forward was to revert to more in-class assessments to combat the rising challenges of AI use. Staff explained that many of the highly diverse assessments arose in response to AI. Staff generally agreed that invigilated open-book exams were a potentially successful method in this regard, however, indicated that clearer instructions would need to be provided in future, as students often spent too long searching for information rather than attempting to answer the questions given to them. It was also mentioned that staff had some success in deterring the use of AI by designing assessments to focus more on the application of their knowledge rather than its recollection. Staff generally felt that School policy on AI was clear. Students, on the other hand, felt that they were generally left with uncertainty regarding the extent to which AI could be used within their learning and asked if the School could make this clearer to them at the beginning of their courses.
- 3.3.5 Regarding feedback, students felt that there were discrepancies both in the timeliness of feedback return and feedback content. Students highlighted that in one instance feedback was copied and pasted from the rubric, which in turn did not provide meaningful individualised feedback. In instances where feedback was delayed, students would often find themselves attempting to complete new assessments, or even new courses, without a further understanding of how they could have improved from previous assessments. Staff acknowledged that this was an issue for some block-taught courses. Students also acknowledged that it was difficult for staff to meet the three-week turnaround times for marking and feedback due to their individual workloads but that generally this three-week turnaround time was met.
- 3.3.6 Formative assessments were mentioned by staff as an invaluable tool to help provide students with feedback at the earliest possible opportunities. Students praised the way in which tutors explained assessment processes all the way through courses and provided formative opportunities to engage with modes of assessment before the summative assignments. However, staff noted difficulties in getting all students to engage with formative assessments. Staff noted that making formative assessments compulsory could cause a rise in C6s and, as a result, a heavier workload for both academic and support staff. When asked what was being done to help encourage students to understand the value in formative assessments, staff argued that while they explained their importance at the beginning of courses, many students would still not take up the opportunities provided. Field-work opportunities were praised by staff and students alike, as being able to provide constant feedback during these trips meant that formative feedback could happen almost daily.

3.4 Student Experience, Student Feedback and EDI

- 3.4.1 The School clarified that they have several processes in place to allow for the submission of student feedback. As well as the end of course review forms, students are encouraged to provide feedback to their course coordinators or tutors throughout the academic year. The School also mentioned that class representatives are used to help channel feedback to coordinators and that the representatives for the School were numerous and generally proactive. Students agreed that there were multiple opportunities to provide feedback on their courses. In terms of closing the feedback loop, the School provides students with a “You said, we did” style document at the beginning of each academic year, where the School attempts to show students the value of their feedback contributions and how the School has actioned them.

- 3.4.2 The School reported that there was a timing issue of feedback within fieldwork courses, claiming that their currently adopted institutional systems were not suitable for these courses. Lastly, feedback forms were a growing concern to the School as not only were the number of forms being submitted consistently low, but that the content and wording of some of the feedback on these forms from a small number of students were becoming increasingly aggressive and nasty in nature. The School explained that it was having to vet feedback forms due to the vulgar language and unprofessional nature of the contents prior to issuing them to staff.
- 3.4.3 The School emphasized that in both Undergraduate and Postgraduate Research programmes there were more female students than male students. The School also noted that it had few of its 170 Postgraduate Researcher positions filled by people from overseas countries and that it was looking to innovate in terms of engaging potential candidates from overseas, especially within Marine Biology, where representation from people of colour is extremely low. The School has also received several grants to enhance the diversity of its PhD candidates. It was reported by the School that some of its PhD candidates were engaging in what they believed to be destructive behaviour (towards the School) on social media and that they were now tackling an issue of perceived transphobia within the School.
- 3.4.4 The School also noted that it had been proactive in ensuring that students' provisional needs were met, particularly during exams. The School expressed that while it was doing all it could to ensure that these needs were met, it was struggling to continue to provide the necessary resources (such as invigilators for separate exam rooms) as it found that there is an increasing number of students who now required additional support during exams. Staff explained that they enjoyed being innovative in the way in which they had to respond to the diverse needs of their students but noted that, at times, they were informed by the student or by student support too late to make a huge impact upon their learning. It was noted that international students were not as forthcoming about any learning disabilities they may have or provisions that they may require.
- 3.4.5 Support staff discussed the monitoring processes in the School. The PGR staff noted that PGR students were subject to monitoring every six months, aside from their non-recorded catch-ups with supervisors, workshops, and training events. The only exception to this was for international students, who would be required by visa regulations to check-in monthly. For undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses, the School indicated that QR codes were used as a means for students to register attendance. This system was described to be working reasonably well. Staff highlighted that they would provide an overview of attendance to course coordinators each week and that students who were not engaging would be flagged via the C6 and C7 system. Issues raised by staff included lots of manual input time due to MyTimetable and the Absence Reporting System not working in-sync, as well as students still being able to sign-in for labs due to the sharing of QR codes. However, staff praised the system for its ability to flag students who may not be engaging at an early stage, to ensure that the appropriate support could reach individuals sooner.
- 3.4.6 Students were extremely positive regarding the support they had received from the School as a whole. Personal tutors were noted to play a key role in supporting students through several means both emotionally and in their ability to signpost struggling students. Where there were some instances of a lack of engagement, students admitted that the lack of engagement may have been from their side. Regardless, it was clear that staff at all levels cared about the wellbeing of students. However, students did raise small concerns regarding areas for

potential improvement, including support in navigating MyTimetable and MyAberdeen, particularly for part-time students. It was also noted that despite receiving counselling support initially, there was a lack of system in place for following up with students.

- 3.4.7 Academic staff raised concerns regarding a lack of support processes in place for students during field trips, particularly on residential field trips. Whilst it was acknowledged that in some instances student support is informing them of any provisions that are required, there are no support mechanisms in place for instances which were unknown that may arise suddenly. Staff unanimously agreed that this was becoming a more frequent occurrence, and they were left to deal with situations that they were not professionally equipped to handle. Inclusion provisions are stated in a way that staff can implement but do not detail an account of what students may be experiencing. Residential trips may raise hitherto unknown issues related to protected characteristics. Staff expressed concerns that there is nothing in place to deal with any form of mental health issues. Staff indicated that they feel some students do not raise concerns prior to trips due to fear of not being included. Staff requested that the School work alongside student support in an attempt to establish a process which would help enable them to handle such instances.
- 3.4.8 Postgraduate students expressed a feeling of a lack of community since the COVID-19 pandemic. Students requested more post-graduate aimed events that were less academic in nature. They felt that many of the events were work-focused and as such students whose work did not align with those events were often left with limited social opportunities. Similarly, undergraduate students mentioned that there were little interactions initially with direct entrant students as they were not introduced officially to their new classmates and that many of the PG students did not take part in student-led societies. Students at all levels agreed that more social opportunities that were School-led or involved staff participation would be beneficial.

3.5 Work-based Learning, Employability and Careers

- 3.5.1 The School demonstrated that it valued work-based learning and employability opportunities highly. The School is working closely with careers to put on events for voluntary placements and the School believes that it is doing well regarding internships. The School also brings in many guest speakers to continue to provide their students with different career role models. This was affirmed by students. The School admits, however, that it would like to be more engaged with local businesses and development projects. One issue identified with this was a need for more staff involvement, which appears difficult given current staffing issues. The School aims to make their students aware of career options as early into their studies as possible. The Careers Service alluded that this approach is somewhat successful, as students appeared to be more knowledgeable of their potential jobs market.
- 3.5.2 The Careers Service spoke highly of the School, highlighting that more students from the School now use the service and that this is a result of the hard work of the School's Employability Champion, as well as a strong commitment from the Head of School on employability. The Careers Service noted that the School makes excellent use of job fairs, volunteering opportunities, drop-in sessions and employability boards, in an attempt to promote employability within the School. It was also noted that the School was recently awarded twenty seven-week funded placements. Despite all of this hard work, the Careers Service representative for the School drew attention to concerns over a lack of job opportunities within the North-East of Scotland, leading to unemployment rates being

presented as higher than average (forty percent of graduates remain unemployed for fifteen months after graduation).

- 3.5.3 When asked to report on the success of their work opportunities, the School explained that their accreditation to the Royal Society of Biology was very important for them. Staff explained that the School's number of hours for practical courses are governed by the Royal Society of Biology and that their programmes contained a good number of hours when compared to competitors. Field trips were built into several of the courses. The School emphasised the need to protect this moving forward, despite the financial difficulties being faced by the institution, as the School identified this as one of their key areas of strengths. Students agreed that this was a fantastic element of their studies, proclaiming that there were plenty of excellent opportunities for field-based work and other practical teaching opportunities made available to them.

3.6 PGR Training and Support

- 3.6.1 The School has a large number of PhD students currently. While this is a positive generally, it presents staffing challenges for the School. The School noted that as many as ten percent of PhD students now required additional support and that mental health related issues have increased drastically. In particular, self-funded international students were identified as having higher expectations for the levels of support provided by the School, which has created a few strained relationships between supervisor and student.
- 3.6.2 When asked to explain how postgraduate research students are trained, the School noted that all students have training programmes at School level as well as university level. This was equal for both Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) and non-DTP students. The School holds PGR conferences, research conferences, weekly training for PGR students and regular engagement activities. Student-led initiatives such as mathematical biology, reading groups and decolonising groups, were also noted.
- 3.6.3 When asked if PGR students received regular support, it was noted by staff that meetings with supervisors were not mandated. Some meet students every week, others meet them less depending on what the students preferred. Research groups also meet once a month. If there is an instance where a student complains about a lack of a meeting, it is immediately logged and flagged to academic staff. The School also highlighted that they did not generally want PhD supervision to be conducted online. PGR students who attended the review praised the School for the support that they had received from their supervisors and noted no issues with PGR supervision relating to their own studies. It was, however, flagged that PGR students could benefit from receiving more support in relation to teaching undergraduate students. However, the School did note that some training opportunities were only available to PGR students on DTP partnerships, such as access to the chartered management leadership course, with no alternative provided to non-DTP PGR students.

3.7 Pedagogic Partnership Session

- 3.7.1 The Pedagogic Partnership Session backed up many of the points mentioned during the focused meetings. In addition, those in attendance highlighted several additional points for consideration, which can be found in Appendix A. The School are invited to consider this appendix to help inform future practice. Staff comments are highlighted in yellow and student

comments in other colours, with related responses given in corresponding boxes on each side of the table.

- 3.5.2 There was agreement between staff and students on many of the issues discussed. It was agreed that staff, at all levels, showed support and care for students. The students explained that they felt that staff were approachable when they needed guidance or signposting. There was also agreement that field courses were generally done very well within the School and that students were grateful for the opportunities that were being made available to them. It was also agreed that the School required greater guidance around the use of AI. Staff acknowledged that students were using it and wanted to continue to do so but did not have the appropriate levels of training to fully utilise AI tools for positive learning experiences. Students argued that they had received mixed signals from staff regarding AI usage, with some going so far as prohibiting it altogether. It became clear through discussions with the students that they wished to use AI ethically to help improve upon their work, which staff agreed could be useful should they receive the appropriate training.
- 3.5.3 Staff and students had different experiences in relation to viewing the importance of mandatory lectures. Whilst it was agreed that practical, field and lab-based work should remain mandatory, some students felt that in-person lectures should be made optional. Staff argued that the monitoring system was used for lectures as it would allow them to ensure students were engaging with the courses and could be used as a tool to identify students who needed support. Students noted that the School should stop hosting practical sessions with large numbers of students however staff responded by explaining that this was in place to account for staff numbers and availability of rooms.

PART C: SCHOOL ACTION PLAN

- 4.1 Continue to enhance the learning and teaching experience by:
- (i) considering the processes for selection and allocation of Honours projects to ensure clarity, transparency and parity for students.
 - (ii) ensuring that any new process is clearly communicated to students.
 - (iii) providing greater clarity for both staff and students regarding the use of artificial intelligence within their teaching and/or assessments.
 - (iv) enabling staff to take part in any available training in the use of artificial intelligence as an effective learning tool.
 - (v) continuing to review and evaluate the use of block teaching (i.e. 5/6-week courses) and how this is executed.
 - (vi) continuing to gather staff and student feedback regarding any impacts of block teaching on: student experience; student attendance/engagement; timeliness of feedback; opportunities for interdisciplinarity; and staff workload.

- (vii) reviewing and making any adjustments and improvements in line with any target areas highlighted.

4.2 Enhance the experience in teaching spaces by:

- (i) consulting with students to gather formal feedback around learning experiences in the Science Teaching Hub (STH), particularly in relation to accessibility and potential sensory overload.
- (ii) in line with feedback, considering possible ways to improve student learning and teaching experiences in the STH as needed.

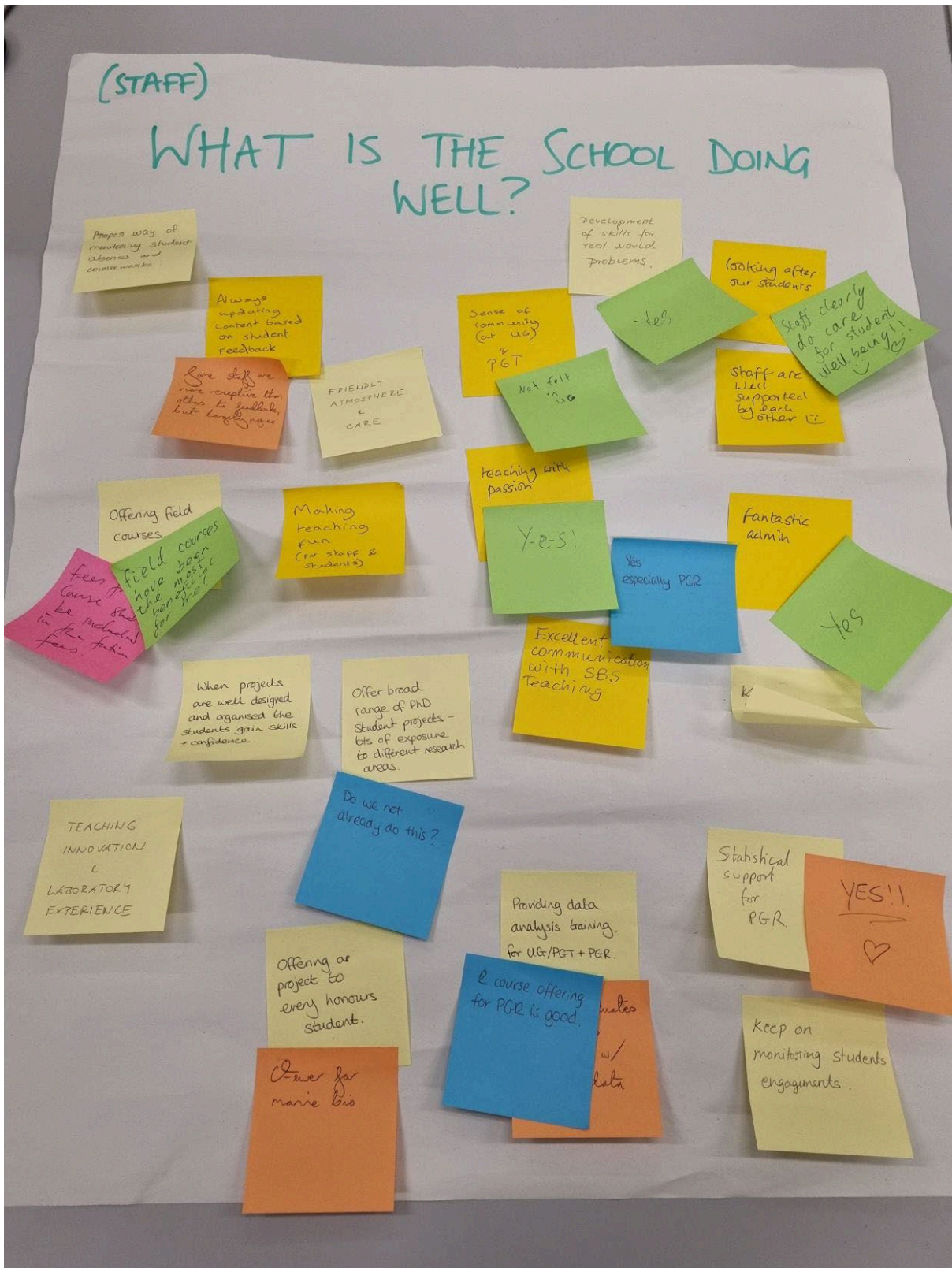
4.3 Enhance the support offered to students by:

- (i) liaising with Student Support and, as appropriate, the Dean for Student Support and Experience, to consult on and develop processes for helping staff to effectively support student wellbeing during residential fieldwork (particularly in relation to support for disabilities including mental ill health).
- (ii) in line with these discussions, creating guidance for staff to enable them to support students on fieldwork.

4.4 Aim to enhance the student experience by:

- (i) continuing to seek ways to promote social opportunities for staff and students, to build community across the School and across different levels of study.
- (ii) developing strategies for effectively communicating social opportunities to students.

Appendix A – Pedagogic Partnership Session feedback



(STUDENTS)

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL DOING WELL?

Opportunities for demostroing experiences

Assess how on the whole encouraged for that develop for my own benefit

Personalized Career courses

Supportive Staff + supportive technical staff

Transition to the Science Teaching

Teaching - knowledge & SKILLS VERY RELEVANT TO EMPLOYMENT

Consistent Communication From Lecturers

Signposting additional support

Research opportunities + sharing + speakers

Collaborative research within + between schools (as a PGR not as a WE)

Field Trips & Courses

Disability support has been fantastic. Always feel supported by staff.

Always feel like we can talk to staff about anything ♡

Training for PGR demostroing is good. ⚡

Postgraduate feedback is consistently good. (PhD)

Personal tutor system works well overall.

Upper Learning - Now built upon old

Pastoral support is fantastic especially for personal issues/hardship fund)

PhD supervision is great

(STUDENTS)

Uch is not visible through the British Council Education programme - not use for standard students.

More plant/geom & biochemistry stuff

Honours Project - does single semester work? for undergrad

Pre-acted thoughts on honours projects earlier in degree

WHAT COULD THE SCHOOL IMPROVE ON?

- AI is thinkable how to class maybe finding ways to support it - not as for actually using it - not as for the way it is used in it

ETHICAL use of AI.

No demonstrator opportunities for undergraduates.

Stats course could it be then thread. difficult when used for a year

Community

Training for international students (skills developed during PhD)

More regular assessments/monitoring for PhD students.

Meeting facilities for small groups & for virtual meetings.

Student awareness of wider facilities ie room bookings.

Some practicals just a little bit of a horror to use a single piece of equipment due to being poor

International engagement is good. Feels like things treated like a package. Limited at home/industry.

Interactions / community across UG - PGT - MSc - PGR + STAFF and the buildings!

Undergraduate feedback is inconsistent. Course coordinators grade differently.

Communication between course coordinators especially when running concurrently

Transparency About Rates For STA

Internship opportunities are limited for MSc students. Very biology-related ones.

Marketing for MSc Programmes

Making interdisciplinary course taking more viable

Implementing Plant Science in other general bio courses

Improve on collaboration between PhD and MSc students.

PGR Research bites idea is great but most sessions I can learn in more detail elsewhere. Focus on feedback e.g. on presentations, on networking, rather than learning per se.

Concern for health & noise biology staff

Rooms in Crickshole/PHD office are very cold!

QA of Lab Material

Smaller demonstrator to student ratios in practical classes

More accessible labs - e.g. smaller for neurodivergent students having paper reduce barriers for help

Use the advisors for PGRs

facilities -> PGR office SO COLD

Inclusion of Honours Introduction in Lectures

(STAFF)

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL STOP DOING?

Stop sending
so many
emails

STOP CHECKING
LECTURE
ATTENDANCE

PhD/
Honours/Masters
that are too
ambitious or
can't be achieved

YES!!
♡

Group work -
students often
feel it is unfair.

However,
essential
for most students

Old exam
system needs
reform/
overhaul

Group work for
assessments is
difficult... but
life skill of
group work is
important...

Old fashioned
exams requiring
simple recall.

YES!
♡

FEWER
ASSESSMENTS
PER COURSE
✓

...but
Appropriate
number of
assessments

(STUDENTS)

WHAT SHOULD THE SCHOOL STOP DOING?

Closed-book exams?
- Don't take into account remembering
- stress papers rather than learning the topic

Students generally do better on closed book exams.
Closed-book doesn't have to be a memory test

Exams held in STH under lab conditions

Some students have national trophies careers

4hr Lectures
W

Agree!
Who does this??!

Short-lived 5 week courses especially for technical teaching

Practicals with 100+ students

Not enough staff, time taking issues.
Not enough lab space

IT WORKS FOR SOME COURSES

Using pre-recorded lectures as main delivery rather than as support

voted!