

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee – 29 May 2009

Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Responses to the Recommendations Arising from the Review of
Geographical and Earth Sciences held on 8 February 2008

Mrs Jackie McCluskey, Clerk to the Review Panel

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The Review Panel commends the Department on the successful merger of the Department of Geography & Geomatics with the Division of Earth Sciences and on the strong sense of community amongst its students. Although a number of recommendations have been made, the Panel has no concerns regarding the quality of the Department, its provision or operation.

Recommendations

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences. They have been cross referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are ranked in order of priority.

Recommendation 1:

The Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Department meets with the current MSc students as a matter of urgency to address their concerns. [Paragraph 4.7.2]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

As noted in the report, Dr Sharp (Director of Learning, Teaching & Assessment) met with MSc students on 18th and 19th February 2008 and identified a detailed action plan that was circulated to students on 25th February 2008. It was agreed with students that any possible impact of the problems identified would be taken into consideration at the point of assessment, and would be drawn to the attention of the external examiners. Dr Sharp attended fortnightly meetings of the MSc teaching staff to monitor progress. The external examiners were encouraged to raise the problems with students at the end of the year, which they did, stating that students had reported that the Department had responded quickly and appropriately to their concerns.

Recommendation 2:

Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Faculty address staff concerns on communication difficulties and duplication of tasks through its submission to the Estates Strategy with a view to the Department being located on one site. [Paragraph 4.8.9]

For the attention of: **Dean/Head of Department/Director of Estates**

Response – Head of Department/Dean

A request for a new building to house the Department on a single site was included within the Faculty submission to the 2008-09 budget round. The Dean set-up a fixed-term working group in October 2008, chaired by the Head of Department. The working group report has been finalised and sent to Vice-Principals (Strategy; Research; Teaching), the Director of Finance and the Director of Estates, for consideration. The Dean and HoD will meet with Senior Management to progress discussion of these plans during May-June 2009. The final outcome of these deliberations is dependent on University strategy and a new building is a medium-term objective. In the interim, the Department is continuing to re-fit rooms, with Faculty financial support, and to allocate space so as to maximise Departmental operational efficiency.

Response – Director of Estates

This is primarily a matter for the Faculty Management Committee, although Estates and Buildings will respond to input from the Faculty via the Faculty Planning process.

Recommendation 3:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department and Faculty monitor the effect of the generic undergraduate regulations on student numbers and associated staff student ratios and, if necessary, consider limiting student numbers by increasing the entry requirements into Level 3. Consideration should also be given to comparative Faculty data to establish the extent of the issue reported. [Paragraph 4.8.2]

For the attention of: **Dean/Head of Department**

Response Head of Department/Dean:

The numbers of students entering the Honours years in 2008-9 continued the recent rising trend, specifically in the Earth Science degree. Projected figures for 2009-10 show another significant rise. The Department is proposing to raise the entry tariff to Honours Earth Science to a grade C overall in Level-2 Earth Science. This proposal will go through Faculty and University committees during spring 2009, for incorporation into the 2009-10 Calendar. Further increase of entry requirements will be considered if numbers continue to rise. The transition of the University towards being fully selective for Science entrants is expected to raise student standards and will place further pressure on numbers. Additionally we anticipate improved student quality and consequent progression to Honours due to University and Departmental efforts at raising entry standards by more targeted and improved recruitment, and the recent decision by the University of St Andrews to withdraw from undergraduate Earth Science provision. We are working to manage increased student numbers through staffing (one part-time Teaching Fellowship, aimed specifically at 3-year Honours degree student support has been advertised), careful management of timetables wherever possible, and refurbishment of teaching facilities. With Faculty support, a proposal to re-fit three large teaching rooms in the Gregory Building has been submitted for consideration under the University's Capital Expenditure Programme (for 2009-10 spend).

Recommendation 4:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department seeks guidance from the Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group on the use of the full scale available to them in the Code of Assessment as it was considered this would further encourage the use of higher grades. [Paragraph 4.3.3]

For the attention of: **Head of Department/Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group**

Response - Department:

Professor Hoey and Dr Sharp met with Professor Nash and Mr Craig to discuss this issue. As can be seen from Professor Nash's letter of 15th October 2008 and as was confirmed in the meeting, Professor Nash and Mr Craig are entirely happy with our interpretation of the Code of Assessment, describing it as "good practice". To quote from their letter "...the figures provide clear reassurance that the introduction of the Code – however applied – has not resulted in a reduction in the number of students being awarded first class results" .

Response: Convener of Code of Assessment Working Group

As recommended, in my capacity as Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group, together with Mr Jim Craig, Clerk to the Working Group, I met Professor Trevor Hoey, Head of the Department, on 7th November. Professor Hoey was accompanied by Dr Joanne Sharp, departmental Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment.

Prior to this meeting, Mr Craig had prepared an analysis of assessment outcomes at Level 1, Level 2 and final Honours for the twelve years 1996-7 to 2007-8. Comparing average results for broadly equivalent periods of time before and after the introduction of the Code of Assessment, the percentage of 'A' grades at Level 1 had increased from 7.62 to 14.8, and at Level 2 from 7.92 to 12.85. The percentage of single Honours degrees in the Department awarded as Firsts had increased from 5.24 to 9.58. These figures neither support nor challenge the External Examiner's expectations for the number of first class awards at all levels, but they indicate strongly that the way the Department has applied the Code of Assessment has not had a deflationary effect on assessment outcomes.

The DPTLA Panel was right to draw attention to the fact that the Department was not using exactly as prescribed that part of the Code which set the range of marks which might be awarded. The extent of the departure from normal practice was found, however, to be less significant than is implied by the Panel's encouragement that the full scale should be used. The full range of A1 to H is recognised and all points within that range may appear as outcomes of aggregation at course and programme level. All that is missing is the availability to markers in the first instance of the points A2 and A4. Professor Hoey and Dr Sharp argued convincingly that this did not have a dampening effect on marks since, as prescribed, the default A-grade was an A3, and a 'better than default' would have to be an A1.

Professor Hoey and Dr Sharp demonstrated a very conscientious commitment to assessment grading using descriptors anchored in intended learning outcomes. Commendably, the Department had amended the generic verbal descriptors to increase their relevance to the courses it taught and, significantly, had written specific descriptors also for bands A1, A3 and A5 instead of relying on subjective degrees of 'better' or 'worse' to distinguish these. Furthermore, the Department's support for formative assessment, using the Code of Assessment, by student peers was thought to deepen and reinforce their understanding of the principles which were fundamental to the Code.

In conclusion, we felt that what the Department was doing was consistent with the spirit of the Code and varied less from its letter than might have first appeared to be the case. Indeed, other departments would do well to follow the example set by Geographical & Earth Sciences as outlined in the preceding paragraph.

Recommendation 5:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the workload model and allocation of work is communicated more clearly to new staff and that the mentoring practice in the Department should be more standardised with a view to ensuring consistency of practice. The Review Panel also **recommends** that the Department produces a handbook for new staff which would

help to clarify the workload model; allocation of work and mentoring further as well as provide information about other departmental procedures. [Paragraph 4.8.4]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

Following this review and discussion of the outcomes of RAE2008, a revised approach to workload allocation is being developed for use in the 2009-10 academic session. This will be discussed and communicated to all staff during May/June 2009, and will be used in workload allocations for the following session. A staff handbook (in the form of a series of web-mounted documents) has been initiated, with input from academic and support staff. Completion of the first phase of this is scheduled for summer 2009.

Recommendation 6:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department consider assigning departmental responsibility for ensuring that IT and software issues are managed and resolved in a timely manner. [Paragraph 4.8.6]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

The Department IT Committee has discussed this issue and has put in place a more robust procedure to minimise future IT problems. However, some incompatibilities remain between University support and specialist Departmental software requirements that require to be managed locally. For session 2009-10 new IT support arrangements will be in place following staff retirement and office space re-allocation, and it is planned to introduce a more regular system of checking of IT requirements for classes.

Recommendation 7:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department provides additional training in the use of MOODLE, for those staff who feel they would benefit from it, to ensure consistency of use across the Department. In addition, the Panel **recommends** that the Department introduces a MOODLE site for staff to share experience and expertise in using the software. [Paragraph 4.8.7]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

The Department continues to publicise MOODLE training opportunities as they arise, and has two staff members who are MOODLE administrators. Specific MOODLE training sessions for the Department are being considered for early summer 2009 and autumn 2009 (at the start of the new academic year). Rather than have a Departmental MOODLE site for sharing experiences, we encourage staff to use University of Glasgow resources (<http://moodle.gla.ac.uk/mod/resource/>) for this purpose. MOODLE issues are an item for end-of-year teaching review meetings (June each year), and we will use these meetings to identify any specific MOODLE training issues.

Recommendation 8:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Learning and Teaching Centre and Department investigate the possibility of providing more training for GTAs in the form of classroom and student management skills. [Paragraph 4.8.5]

For the attention of: **Head of Department/Learning and Teaching Centre**

Response: Head of Department

A meeting was held after the DPLTA review with senior GTAs (involved in delivering tutorials), Jane Mackenzie from LTC and Dr Sharp to discuss teaching support needs. It was agreed that monthly support meetings would be organised by Dr Sharp within which different teaching-related issues could be raised. All GTAs offering tutorials would be invited to attend. Meetings would also be attended by Dr Sharp and, on some occasions, invited experts (Dr Mackenzie attended our penultimate meeting in semester 1). In addition, a GTA teaching portfolio has been established by the Department (see Appendix A) to further support GTA career development.

Response: Learning and Teaching Centre

The Learning and Teaching Centre has considered this recommendation and reached the following conclusions:

- The Learning and Teaching Centre is aware that the GTA Statutory Training Course provides initial training for tutors and demonstrators, often before they have undertaken any teaching tasks. It further recognises the concerns of GTAs who would appreciate additional support for their teaching role, once they have undertaken some teaching. In addition, it is aware that the department supports GTAs through regular meetings and a structured framework of advancement. Dr Jane McKenzie and Dr Mary McCulloch have already made contact with Dr Jo Sharp regarding how we might provide additional support through these meetings.

The Learning and Teaching Centre has determined the following strategies for dealing with this recommendation:

- The GTA Development Forum (<http://services.moodle.gla.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=184>) is a Moodle site which has been developed to provide resources for GTAs in their teaching role. This site is introduced to GTAs in the Statutory Training session and the web address provided in supporting documentation. Information about and a link to the site is provided on the LTC website at: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/learn/taughtcourses/graduate-teaching-assistant-tutors-and-demonstrators-statutory-training/>. This resource can be promoted to GTAs.
- The Learning and Teaching Centre's website provides a range of useful reference material which could be helpful to GTAs. The Learning and Teaching Centre would encourage the Department to promote these resources to its GTAs. Full details of the resources available are provided at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/learn/good-practice-resources/>
- The Learning and Teaching Centre would value the opportunity to liaise further with the department, to provide a follow-up session for tutors in tutorial practice, and the department is recommended to contact Dr Mary McCulloch (m.mcculloch@admin.gla.ac.uk) about this in the first instance. The Learning and Teaching Centre feels that it would be of more benefit to provide targeted additional training support in collaboration with the department, rather than offer more generalised support, as this might not address the issues about which the GTAs feel most concerned.
- The Learning and Teaching Centre is developing a Moodle resource to support Reflection on Teaching, which it is expected will provide a means by which higher education teachers can reflect upon the learning and teaching aspects of their academic practice. The resource will also provide directions for those who wish to seek accreditation of their teaching through the Higher Education Academy. This resource is currently in development and will be piloted with a small number of groups (one of which it is hoped will be this department) over summer 2009, for implementation in the academic year 2009-2010.

Recommendation 9:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department ensures that Supervisors follow the agreed procedures and consider whether further guidelines for staff and students would be useful to ensure consistent student expectations as well as consistency of approach with regard to support for, and consequently, assessment of, dissertations. [Paragraph 4.3.4]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

Changes to the Honours Geography programme have been introduced in the 2008-09 session which should clarify to students the support they can expect from staff members. This should minimise perceptions of differing levels of support from supervisors. Staff will also be reminded of the expected level of commitment. We will introduce a supervision form from 2009-10 with space for both student and supervisor to sign that a meeting has been attended and note agreed outcomes, again to help to ensure consistency.

Recommendation 10:

The Panel viewed the recruitment web-site as an excellent resource for current as well as prospective students and **recommends** that the Department highlight the link from the recruitment web-site to the main Department page to make it easier to find. [Paragraph 4.5.1]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

This has been implemented as recommended.

Recommendation 11:

The Review Panel acknowledged the benefits of the portfolio approach in Earth Sciences, which unlike other institutions, provides a mapping project and laboratory work, and **recommends** that the Department explain these to students at the recruitment stage, making particular reference to employability. [Paragraph 4.4.2]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

This is being taken forward as part of our ongoing process of continuously updating recruitment materials. The importance of employability, and how our courses enhance employment opportunities, is stressed in recruitment literature and presentations.

Recommendation 12:

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department expand the careers information provided on the website to include information on opportunities to study abroad. [Paragraph 4.6.3]

For the attention of: **Head of Department**

Response:

This has been implemented (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/gesinfo/erasmusjya-studyabroad/>)

Recommendation 13:

The Panel **recommends** that the Clerk of Senate consider the level of University support provided to departments in relation to students with disabilities [Paragraph 4.6.5]

For the attention of: **The Clerk of Senate**

Response:

A Disability Guide to Departments has been produced which clearly outlines Departmental responsibilities

Recommendation 14:

Given the evidence provided by the staff that students were not always aware of what constituted feedback, the Panel **recommends** that the Department should clarify to students the nature and extent of the feedback that will be provided. [Paragraph 4.3.2]

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

Staff are being encouraged to discuss the nature of feedback with students at the beginning of courses. This is being reinforced in Geography-1 and -2 tutorials and in Earth Science-1 laboratory classes in an attempt to establish the nature of feedback early in students' careers.

Appendix A

Proposal for Geography Postgraduate & Postdoctoral Teaching Portfolios

Rationale

We have been very fortunate in the Department to have had an enthusiastic cadre of postgraduates and, more recently, postdocs supporting teaching. It is fair to say that the successful provision of teaching in the Geography degree (and the positive feedback from undergraduates and assessors) could not be achieved without this contribution.

In addition to providing this excellent support, one of our primary motivations for including PG and PD teachers in the curriculum was in terms of career development (as highlighted in the Roberts Report). However, in the review of the Department's teaching last session, questions were raised as to how much support we provide for PG and PD teachers in the development of teaching skills, particularly in the context of tutoring. In light of this, I had a discussion with some of the PG teachers and Jane Mackenzie of the Learning and Teaching Centre to see how we could support this goal more effectively – in short, how we could give something back to our part-time teaching staff in recognition of what their work contributes to the Department. In this discussion we agreed to propose the development of Postgraduate and Postdoctoral Teaching Portfolios which would chart their experience, training and skills and would be something to support future applications for academic employment.

Proposal

Some support is already provided for PG/PD teachers, notably the “progressive” system of teaching for most which moves from lab demonstrating to lab leading to tutoring, and which involves regular meetings where new PG/PD teachers can learn from peers with more experience. There is also some on-the-job training for lab teaching (the “how to demonstrate” film and discussion and the filming of lab leaders’ introductions and the discussion of these). We are proposing adding three further elements to the teaching portfolios:

1. *Monthly meetings of PG/PD tutors (over coffee)* to discuss teaching and classroom issues. In the first semester, this will be co-ordinated by the Director of Teaching, and in the second, the PG/PD tutors will take over the running of the meetings (and may be held without the Director of Teaching). During the 08-09 session, these meetings will be held at 11am on the first Friday of each month in the EQ tea room. The first meeting will discuss general issues regarding the beginning of the academic year and expectations of the classes, the second will be a discussion about classroom management led by Jane Mackenzie of the LTC. Subsequent meetings will be based around issues raised by the GTAs and may include issues dealing with wider issues of professional development (CV writing, interview presentations, etc.) to which all Department PGs and PDs will be invited.
2. *Development of teaching quality materials.* There has been a very patchy return of information from undergraduates evaluations to the PG/PD tutors. It is vital for the development of their teaching skills and for their production of evidence to support future job applications that PG/PD teachers get timely feedback from class tutors. The proposal is that PG/PD teachers get individualised feedback from class tutors within a month of evaluations being submitted by undergraduates – this would include a summary of undergraduate student feedback as well as a statement from the class tutor on the PG/PD's performance. This will be collected as part of the PG/PD teachers' portfolios. To help facilitate this, Jo and Davie are looking into standardising the evaluation forms in the Department (to include some of the language and format of the NSS, for instance) and the use of Moodle in final classes to make more efficient the collation of results.

3. *Support for experienced PG/PD tutors to apply for Associate Status of the Higher Education Academy.* This would normally be a step taken towards the end of a PG/PD's teaching career in the Department in preparation for the job market. Postgraduates would normally have taught in the Department for at least two years including at least one year of tutorials. It requires an application from the student and two letters of reference. The proposal is that the Director of Teaching and class tutors support PG/PD students who wish to apply for this recognition, and that the Department pays the processing fee (currently £50)