

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 29 May 2009

Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment: Report of the Review of Department of English Language held on 20 February 2009

Mr Jim Craig, Clerk to the Review Panel

Review Panel:

Professor John Coggins	Vice Principal (Life Science, Medicine & Veterinary Medicine), Convener
Professor John Thompson	Queens University Belfast, External Subject Specialist
Professor Clive Upton	University of Leeds, External Subject Specialist
Mr Kenneth Law	Students' Representative Council
Professor Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh	Department of Celtic
Professor Mona Siddiqui	Senate Assessor on Court
Dr Sarah Mann	Learning and Teaching Centre
Mr Jim Craig	Senate Office

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Department of English Language is located in the late Victorian terrace of, originally, private houses that comprise University Gardens. It is in the Faculty of Arts and, since 1996, has been part of the School of English and Scottish Language and Literature (SESL). The Department's Self Evaluation Report (SER) describes SESL as being "organised as a confederal structure, functioning as a coordinating facility for matters of mutual concern affecting all three departments, e.g. the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)."¹ It is currently led by Professor Smith, the Head of the Department of English Language.
- 1.2 The Department's programmes of teaching, learning and assessment were last reviewed in 2002-3. The conclusions of the Panel, chaired on that occasion by Professor Morris, began with the endorsement that it had been "enormously impressed during its visit ... by the vigour and commitment demonstrated by the permanent staff, and the warm regard in which they were held by undergraduate and postgraduate students and by the Graduate Teaching Assistants."²
- 1.3 As on that earlier occasion the Review Panel received from the Department a generous supply of course handbooks which demonstrated a continuing commitment to providing students with essential and supporting information. It

¹ Self Evaluation Report §1.2

² Report of Review of the Department of English Language held on 24 April 2003, p. 14

received also an SER which had been prepared by the Head of Department in consultation with departmental staff and the several staff-student liaison committees supported by the Department. The content and structure of this report followed the guidance provided by the Senate Office and all members of the Panel found it extremely helpful in identifying areas for exploration and discussion.

1.4 In the course of its visit the Review Panel met:

- the Dean of the Faculty, Professor Elizabeth Moignard,
- the Head of Department, Professor Jeremy Smith,
- 10 other permanent members of teaching and administrative staff,
- the acting Director of the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Dr Debra Strickland,
- 8 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs),
- 8 taught postgraduate students,
- 6 Honours undergraduates and 5 students taking Level 1 or Level 2 courses.

2. Background Information

2.1 Since the previous session the Department had had to adjust to the departure of two former Heads: one to retirement and the other on his appointment as Clerk of Senate. One of these vacancies had been filled by the promotion of a research assistant to a probationary lectureship but, although the appointment of a professor had now been made, the other would not be filled until the summer. The Department appeared also to have been visited by more than its fair share of long term absence.

2.2 The permanent academic staff of the Department currently consists of:

- 2 professors
- 2 readers
- 3 senior lecturers
- 2 lecturers (including 1 probationary)
- 1 RCUK Fellow
- 1 University Teacher (0.3 FTE)

2.3 Student numbers for 2008-9 were as follows:

Students	Headcount
Level 1	309
Level 2	90
Level 3	0
Honours	120
Undergraduate Total	519
Postgraduate Taught	19
Postgraduate Research*	24

*(for information only - research is not covered by the Review)

The Review Panel considered the following range of provision offered by the Department.

MA Honours: Honours in English Language

MLitt in English Language and English Linguistics

MPhil in English Language

The Department contributes to the following *joint* degree programmes offered with other departments or other institutions

MA in General Humanities

MA Honours in English Language and English Literature

MA Honours in English Language and Scottish Literature

MLitt in Medieval and Renaissance Studies

MLitt in Translation Studies in Scotland

The Department also contributes to the following degree programmes offered by other departments or other institutions

MA Honours in English Literature

MA Honours in Scottish Language and Literature

3. Teaching and Learning in a Research Context

- 3.1 It has been noted³ that the rationale for the establishment of the School of English and Scottish Language and Literature was co-ordination in areas of common interest such as the RAE. The SESLL web pages reflect considerable satisfaction in the outcome of RAE 2008. "Not only did we return the largest number of active researchers in Scotland -- we submitted all our staff -- and the third largest in the UK, but 70% of our research was rated as either 'world-leading' (35%) or 'internationally excellent' (35%). Using various measures of research achievement, we are ranked between third and eighth in the UK. This result demonstrates our status as a major institution for the study of English and Scottish language and literature, and builds on our achievement of a 5*-rating in RAE 2001."⁴
- 3.2 The Review Panel discovered that the contribution to this achievement made by the Department of English Language was by no means at the expense of its commitment to teaching which was found to be as secure as in 2003. Undergraduate students at all levels, as well as taught postgraduate students, described enthusiastic lecturing which evidenced an awareness of current research interests. Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and academic staff spoke of research-informed teaching and even of teaching-informed research.
- 3.3 The present review of the Department's programmes was conducted according to the normal prescription but one of the external subject specialists, Professor Thompson from Queen's University, Belfast, expressed his conviction that research activity, and particularly the supervision of research students, should not be excluded from DPTLA reviews. Where, as in this Department, much of the postgraduate teaching on offer was delivered to students at the beginning of their research careers, and where the research activity of staff was seen not

³ See above §1.1

⁴ SESLL web page at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/sesll/>

as belonging in a separate compartment of academic life but as part of an integrated whole, the justification for excluding it from a review of teaching programmes seemed tenuous. At the same time, it was argued, research reviews which focused on the work of faculty-wide graduate schools would deliver pictures which were less clearly defined, and so less useful for developing analyses of performance and recommendations for change. The external subject specialists indicated their intention to write on this subject to Professor Nolan, Vice-Principal (Learning, Teaching and Internationalisation).

4. Overall aims of the Department's provision and how it supports the University Strategic Plan

- 4.1 The University's first strategic objective is set in the context of learning and teaching, and is expressed in terms of achieving renown "internationally for enquiry-led learning in a knowledge culture that is shaped by the richness and diversity of our research environment."⁵ This objective explicitly underpins the aims of the Department's provision as set out in its SER. The Review Panel acknowledged the appropriateness of these aims and found considerable evidence of their being translated successfully by the Department into policy and practice.
- 4.2 The Department included among its aims the expectation that its students should "become independently motivated learners, able to engage confidently with complex issues in a way which invites them to reflect on their own learning and development of skills."⁶ The Review Panel was particularly impressed by the way in which the series of class meetings entitled 'Enhanced Academic Skills in English Language' (EASEL), and built into the MA Honours programme, addressed a whole range of the objectives associated with the strategic theme 'Enhancing the student experience' in the University's Strategic Plan.⁷
- 4.3 The same area of the University's Strategic Plan recognises the importance of equipping undergraduates with the skills sought by prospective employers and which will advantage the student when transferred to the working environment. From its reading of the SER, and in its discussions with students, the Panel was impressed by how thoroughly the Department had accepted its responsibilities in this respect; it **commends** the Department in particular for its participation in the University project 'Aiming University Learning @ Work' through which some six or seven student volunteers were trained to teach English as a second language, subsequently undertaking to tutor migrants and asylum seekers.
- 4.4 In its SER the Department draws attention to the University's mission statement which includes its "aim to sustain and add value to Scottish culture and society ..."⁸ Within the Department this has been realised by building courses in Scots and Scottish English into all its programmes. Again the Panel found clear evidence of this, and noted the contribution of members of the Department to Scottish Language Dictionaries, the body funded by the Scottish Government and responsible for compiling several dictionaries of Scots, including the Scottish National Dictionary.⁹ The Panel was generally impressed

⁵ University Strategic Plan, 2006-10, p.15

⁶ Self Evaluation Report §2.5

⁷ University Strategic Plan, 2006-10, p. 45-8

⁸ University web page at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/about/>

⁹ Web page of Scottish Language Dictionaries at <http://www.scotsdictionaries.org.uk/>

by the interest the Department showed in promoting knowledge transfer in the areas relevant to its teaching and research activities.

- 4.5 One of the five key principles underpinning the Learning and Teaching Strategy is 'international education' attained by the provision of "learning opportunities abroad, by ensuring diversity of the student and staff populations, by developing an internationally relevant curriculum and through engagement and mutual development with strategic partners around the world ..."¹⁰ The Review Panel recognised that the Department wholly supported this commitment and that it had established and maintained links with several overseas institutions, particularly in northern Europe. It read in the SER of the Department's concern that the changes introduced to the structure of the academic year, and in particular the requirement for Honours assessment at the end of the second semester in each of the Honours years, would lead to a reduction in the number of students going abroad. It was reported that previously between 10% and 20% of Honours students had taken advantage of the Erasmus exchange programme for a short period of study abroad at the end of their third year. The Panel learned that it was the Department's intention to encourage students to spend the whole of the Junior Honours year in the partner institution though it was not optimistic about the level of take-up it might anticipate. The Panel **recommends** that the Department keeps this matter under review and that, if students prove unwilling or unable to subscribe to the proposed longer absence from Glasgow, the subject be raised for discussion in SESLL and at Faculty level where other possible remedies might be sought. Professor Smith discussed with the Panel his idea of negotiating with Erasmus partners – perhaps in Scandinavia, Germany or Spain - the possibility of students taking a credit-bearing native language course. The Panel also considered how the difficulty might be eased by reducing the length of some 30 credit courses to 20 or 15 credits, although Professor Smith pointed out that such a change would need to be subjected to an opportunity-costing, since it would necessitate complete recalibrating of the Honours programme. Professor Smith indicated that the Department was conducting an ongoing review of the Department's Erasmus partnerships; most students admitted to preferring an English speaking environment but this presented difficulties in finding partners offering a similar range of study. He pointed out that the Department of English Language could be described as a department of Philology, and thus found many partner-institutions with similar orientations and titles in continental Europe.

5. An Evaluation of the Student Learning Experience

5.1 Aims

The Review Panel received Programme Specifications for all of the Department's teaching provision, these documents containing statements of programme aims which the Panel found explicitly consistent both with the aims of the Department discussed above and with those of the other departments in the School of English and Scottish Language and Literature. It was confirmed by the Panel's external subject specialists that these aligned with the QAA's subject benchmark statements for English, and conformed to the guidelines set by the two relevant UK Research Councils.

¹⁰ University Strategic Plan, 2006-10, p. 30

5.2 *Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)*

- 5.2.1 The Review Panel was directed by the SER to the Department's programme ILOs in its Programme Specifications. These the Panel found to be entirely consistent with the statements of programme aims but not always with the University guidance on the drafting of ILOs prepared by the Learning and Teaching Service and published by the Senate Office. ILOs should state what students ought to be able to demonstrate on completion of their course or programme and, while a programme should by all means provide opportunities for students to develop awareness and understanding, such open-ended expressions convey too vague an impression of what the student is expected to be able to do on completion of the programme. The Panel **recommends**, therefore, that the Department revisits the statements of its ILOs and that it revises these as appropriate in order to conform with the published guidance.
- 5.2.2 Whatever reservations the Review Panel had with respect to the way some of the ILOs were drafted, it was entirely satisfied that the Department delivered an understanding of the importance of ILOs to its students, for example at class induction meetings. It noted with satisfaction the statement in the SER that "explicit reference to the achievement of ILOs is made in [assessment] feedback to students."¹¹ Students at Levels 1 and 2 told the Panel that they were more conscious of ILOs in English Language than in their other subjects.

5.3 *Assessment, Feedback and Achievement*

- 5.3.1 The Review Panel was impressed by, and **commends** the Department for the range of formative and summative assessment mechanisms used in sequence across its programmes to support progressive achievement of increasingly complex knowledge and understanding. The presentation of this topic in the SER seemed well thought out and the regular reminders of what were the learning objectives of each course, and how the assessment served to measure student progress, an example that others might follow. From the range of assessment tools listed the student member of the Panel was attracted to the insights that would be available to students marking sample essays in workshop sessions.
- 5.3.2 All of the students whom the Review Panel met appreciated the exercises in formative assessment and the feedback returned to them. Students at Levels 1 and 2 said that timescales for submission of work were fair and that feedback was helpful and was returned within the promised timescale. Some Honours students, however, said that they would like to have more formative assessment in the Junior Honours year. The Review Panel **commends** the Department's feedback strategy which has been structured to support the development of specific knowledge, understanding and generic skills. The essay feedback sheets seemed to deliver formative assessment that was clear and to the point, related to the relevant ILOs, and with information for the student on what to do next. The Honours students who spoke to members of the Panel were, on the whole, very comfortable with the prescribed essay submission dates.
- 5.3.3 The Review Panel was interested to discuss both with undergraduates and staff the decision to discontinue inclusion of seminar presentations in summative assessment. From members of staff the Panel heard of concerns about various aspects of assuring the validity of grades awarded. Most of the undergraduates, while valuing the experience and feedback on performance,

¹¹ Self Evaluation Report §3.2.2

were uncomfortable with the idea of the mark counting towards their course result, and approved the Department's decision that it should not do so. Staff assured the Panel that, where presentation performance had contributed to the summative assessment, that contribution had been very small, and therefore its removal of no great consequence. The Panel recognised that this was a two-edged argument and, while it accepted the Department's judgement, suggested that this matter be kept under review.

- 5.3.4 Students told the Review Panel that feedback on their performance in these seminar presentations had been very useful and had helped make the event a good learning experience. The point was well made that communication through language was both the subject under investigation and the medium through which learning and assessment of learning was conveyed. At the same time the Panel was advised by staff that changes to the structure of the academic year, and the introduction of examinations at the end of year 3, had resulted in less time being available for student presentations in Honours classes. It was suggested to the Panel that this was not altogether a bad thing as students had traditionally put more effort into this event than was perhaps appropriate.
- 5.3.5 The Review Panel was particularly impressed by the arrangements for the assessment of Honours dissertations which included provision of a viva voce for each student. Comments to the Panel from Honours students on this subject were very positive.
- 5.3.6 As might have been expected, Honours students had mixed views on the introduction of a split diet of Honours examinations although there was general agreement that, in determining the Honours classification, greater weight should be attributed to performance in the final year. Honours students said that they preferred oral to written feedback on their coursework and some said that they would like a scheduled tutorial for the return of essays. Others expressed the view that, although this provision was not necessarily standard, they were confident it would be granted if requested. The Review Panel was impressed by this assurance but **recommends** that the Department consider whether oral feedback on Honours coursework might be offered routinely.
- 5.3.7 Although the Review Panel thought most of the course handbooks and other material prepared for students to be of a very good standard, it was concerned that the presentation of the Code of Assessment, especially in the Level 1 Handbook, was occasionally misleading, and generally suggested the mechanisms for determining and combining grades more complex than they actually were. This matter was discussed with the Head of Department prior to the Panel's visit and Professor Smith, while agreeing to review how the Code was presented in course literature, offered assurances that students in the Department understood the regulations. Feedback from the SRC and from students generally has, however, strongly emphasised the need for the assessment rules to be presented as simply as possible. Further, as it is a principle of the Code that it should be applied consistently across the University, it is preferable that it be presented without unnecessary variation. The Panel **recommends** that the Department proceeds with its undertaking to review, and amend as appropriate, its presentation of the assessment regulations.
- 5.3.8 One of the external subject specialists drew attention in his initial observations to the assessment criteria included in the Programme Specification for the MLitt in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and expressed a wish to make use of it – with appropriate acknowledgement – for his own purposes. At one level this

reflects positively on the Department's ability to describe analytically what is required in a good answer. At another, however, these criteria, appearing under the statement that "end of semester presentation, essays and the dissertation are assessed using [these] criteria" present something of a difficulty. The same Programme Specification contains a statement of intended learning outcomes, and it is these ILOs which should, by definition, provide the criteria of assessment. What is presented as assessment criteria is, in fact, good advice on writing answers which will demonstrate persuasively the attainment of ILOs, and the present description must risk confusion. If, however, the grades awarded are to be sensitive to linguistic style and logical order, these requirements should be represented among the ILOs proper. The Panel therefore **recommends** that the Department (a) removes the sub-section headed 'Assessment criteria' from the Programme Specification, (b) incorporates the advice on writing answers to the appropriate handbook, and (c) reviews the ILOs to determine whether the writing skills identified in that advice should be added.

5.4 Curriculum Design, Development and Content

- 5.4.1 One of the Department's particular strengths appeared to the Review Panel to lie in the sequential structuring across the curriculum of enquiry-led learning, based on a view of its programmes as "interconnected wholes."¹² The SER informed the Panel that programmes were "reviewed on an on-going basis, with the curriculum discussed ... both at the major departmental Planning Meeting, held towards the end of the second semester, and at the "wash-up" end-of-year departmental meeting which all staff are required to attend."¹³ This collective planning and responsibility for the curriculum clearly contributed to its strength. The positive reaction of undergraduates to the learning experience will be discussed below¹⁴ and, the Panel concluded in **commending** the Department's efforts, was evidence that the curriculum worked.
- 5.4.2 The Review Panel was particularly impressed by the programme of workshops in Level 1 which supported socialisation through group work, encouraged enquiry-based learning and the development of academic skills (both specific and generic), emphasised student responsibility for learning through the student-led aspects of the workshops, and facilitated student support and monitoring. Undergraduates talked very positively to the Panel about their experience of Level 1 teaching from the GTAs, and they enjoyed the fact that this teaching sometimes included discussion of the tutors' research.
- 5.4.3 The Review Panel was impressed also by the support given by the Department to the employability agenda and the way it had been absorbed into the curriculum. One of the tasks on the Moodle 'exemplar' course is designed to help students understand the key skills that can be developed through programmes of study, and how best to articulate these for employers. Reference has already been made¹⁵ to the excellence of the EASEL classes available to Honours and PGT students and these too provide a platform on which students and staff may focus on the development of workplace skills. Attendance at EASEL classes is voluntary and the 'course' is not credit bearing but it also includes useful sessions on essay planning, Library use, IT skills, time management and postgraduate studies. The Review Panel discussed with the Head of Department the possibility of persuading recent graduates to

¹² Self Evaluation Report §3.4.1

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See below paragraphs 5.6.3 and 5.7.2

¹⁵ See above paragraph 4.2

visit with a view to passing on advice and sharing their post-graduation experience.

- 5.4.4 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for its use of Moodle which has proved very popular with undergraduates. It appreciated the clear instructions, the provision for social activity, the safe spaces for asking simple and more advanced questions, and the spaces for specific workbooks, etc. It liked the notes for home users, the inclusion of recorded resources, the support for student feedback, and the provision of employability information and tasks. The Panel identified particularly as an example for others the humorous and friendly tone which characterises so many of the Moodle pages.
- 5.4.5 The Review Panel discussed with Professor Smith the possibility of other language courses being provided by other departments as Honours options, French being the only one now available since Medieval Latin had been withdrawn. Several students, certainly, took Joint Honours in English and another language but the Panel agreed that it would be desirable if students had the opportunity to include studies in another language without committing to Joint Honours in that language. Similarly, if feasible in terms of teaching space and workload, the Panel was happy to encourage the Department's making some of its own courses available to students following other language programmes.
- 5.4.6 The Review Panel was impressed from its reading of the SER that a great deal of thought, ingenuity and logistical planning had been invested in the design of the Department's masters programmes. "At Masters level, courses are delivered by a bespoke mixture of lectures, seminars/workshops and one-to-one tutorials, laid down in each student's Personal Teaching Plan. Masters students will typically attend some Honours lectures and seminars on topics for which they have had no previous experience, and also attend special Masters tutorials which engage with subjects at an appropriately advanced level."¹⁶ The Panel thought this ambitious but, in talking to the masters students, it seemed to work. Somehow its flavour was captured in a discussion of Harvard referencing conventions and the possible alternatives which exemplified the range of experiences that was delivered in these integrated programmes.

5.5 *Student Recruitment*

- 5.5.1 Undergraduate recruitment continues to be a difficult issue for the Department with neither English Language nor Linguistics examined by the Scottish Qualifications Authority as a subject in its own right. Comparatively few students express a preference for English Language as one of their first year subjects, and the greater part of those more than 300 students who enrol for Level 1 English Language do so because of its being a requirement for entry to Honours in English Literature. In the course of its visit, the Review Panel concluded that it was to the immense credit of the staff and GTAs that so many students should, in these circumstances, form such an attachment to the subject and those teaching it. The Panel noted in the 2006-7 Annual Monitoring Report for Level 2 that a number of those students who took Level 1 English Language in their second year regretted not being able to continue to Honours. Other aspects and evidence of this attachment are discussed elsewhere¹⁷ in this report but there remains the problem for the Department of getting undergraduates through its doors in the first place.

¹⁶ Self Evaluation Report §3.4.13

¹⁷ See below paragraphs 5.6.3 and 5.7.2

- 5.5.2 The Head of Department drew attention to the problem in the SER and suggested some possible remedies which he discussed with the Review Panel. He said that the Department normally taught around 350 Level 1 students and that it was to be hoped and supposed that the lower number in the current year was something of an aberration. Professor Smith outlined a twin pronged strategy consisting both of raising awareness of the subject and promoting interest in the courses offered by the Department among school pupils in the University's traditional recruitment areas, and of encouraging applications from schools in England where English Language was taught to A-level. In their meeting with the Panel the staff at large clearly endorsed the second of these approaches. The Head of Department himself had indicated that demographic projections for west central Scotland suggested a pressing need to look further afield for undergraduate recruits.
- 5.5.3 The Review Panel encouraged Professor Smith in both of these ventures, and Professor Upton from the University of Leeds offered encouragement by reporting that Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) examining board statistics, for example, showed a rise of 98% in English Language A2 awards between 2002 and 2008. At the same time, 30% of all A2 English studies awards in 2008 were for Language as a single subject, and the University of Leeds had been able to admit only 1 in 13 of those students who had applied to read English Language. The difficulty in attracting large numbers of the unsuccessful applicants to Glasgow was recognised to be the four year degree with its inbuilt additional costs, particularly for potential recruits who had already studied the subject to A-level standard.
- 5.5.4 Again this territory was familiar to the Head of Department who discussed with the Review Panel the possibilities for admitting students with appropriate A-levels direct to Level 2. It was recognised that it was not unknown for students in other subjects to complete an Honours programme in three years. The main difficulties were that, in the Honours MA programme, Level 1 English Language represented only one third of a student's first year curriculum and exemptions from first year study in other subjects might be difficult to negotiate. It was also the case that the Department would be reluctant to drop all of the components of Level 1; not all of these would necessarily have been encountered by the A-level student, and some might reasonably be considered indispensable to the integrity of the programme as a whole. The Panel also discussed with the Head of Department the possibility – especially at a time when the secondary education syllabus is under critical review – of the Scottish Government's being persuaded of the advantages of introducing English Language and Linguistics as a subject option. The Panel recognised that there were no easy remedies but was encouraged by the fact, as evidenced elsewhere in this report, that a problem the Department did not have was the quality of the programme it had to offer. It therefore **recommends** that the Department develops the strategies it was already considering to increase future recruitment to Level 1 which, it was anticipated, would result in greater numbers of students at Level 2 and in Honours.
- 5.5.5 Impressed by the quality of the undergraduate programme the Review Panel was struck also by the enthusiasm of the students it met. These students suggested that what the Department needed to do was to go out and talk to fifth and sixth years at the kind of schools that they themselves had come from. The Panel recognised that the effectiveness of such a campaign would be increased if the students it had seen could act as ambassadors, and a video recording of a discussion among students of the curriculum and their experience of the Department might prove a very effective marketing tool. The

Panel recognised that these ideas might not be feasible but encouraged the Department to consider them or how otherwise it might employ its students within a recruitment strategy. One of the Level 2 students said that it was important to get the message across that English Language wasn't just about grammar. A Level 1 student whom the Panel met said that he had been impressed by what he had learned about the Department at Open Day.

5.6 *Student Progression, Retention and Support*

- 5.6.1 The range of support provided by the Department and directed towards student progression and retention is most impressive. The Department clearly wants to know who its students are and to be assured that they are fully participating. "Student attendance and performance are carefully monitored through the completion of attendance sheets and examination of mark-sheets, coordinated in the departmental office and overseen by programme conveners. Underperformance in key exercises and/or failure to attend lectures/seminars trigger action by programme conveners: students are asked to see conveners as soon as possible, and plans for support are put in place, with action points placed on file. Students required to resit examinations are encouraged to contact relevant programme conveners to discuss any problems they have had."¹⁸
- 5.6.2 The undergraduates who met the Review Panel did not appear to feel oppressed by this regime but described the Department as "friendly" and "well organised." The Department's secretaries were identified as being particularly helpful. The undergraduates said that a lot of emphasis was placed on communications. Honours students reacted strongly to the suggestion that the Department might be "a poor cousin of English Literature." However they might have misinterpreted the question, their response – and those who spoke knew both – referred to a contrast in teaching with English Literature being more laissez-faire in its approach. A spoon-fed curriculum does not tend to indicate enquiry-led learning, but clearly a balance has to be struck and the Review Panel concluded that it was a balance which the Department had got right - students reporting a preference for the clarity of its direction and the sustained level of interest in student progress that it evidenced. Perhaps what the Department achieved was something equivalent to the security provided in former times (with their more generous staff-student ratios) by the individual tutorial. There was also evidence, however, that the programme was presented in a holistic way that the students appreciated. This seemed to include a transparent emphasis on preparing, with explicitly stepped progress, for more independent learning.
- 5.6.3 The Review Panel thought a particularly good example of practice was demonstrated in the area of Honours selection and induction through interviews with all students indicating an interest in studying the subject at Honours level. From Honours students the Panel received a clear message that support from staff was good because "they tell you what you need to do." One student said that "if you have an issue, you get a proper discussion, you don't just get fobbed off." Staff were reported to be good at lending their own copies of books and generally "looking for ways to help." Honours students seemed confident that they knew what they needed to know about the University's support services such as the Disability Service. Invited to say how things might be improved, one said she "wouldn't change anything," and no one demurred. The Panel wished to **commend** the Department for the broad range of its

¹⁸ Self Evaluation Report §3.6.3

student support. It **commends** the Department particularly for its excellent *How to write an essay* which, given its provenance, might usefully be adopted widely across the University.

- 5.6.4 The masters students whom the Review Panel met were strongly appreciative of the support given by staff, and the learning experience in the Department generally. This was described as “very relaxed” because “tutors don’t pressurise.” Another said that the fortnightly meetings with his tutor were “fantastic.” Yet another described his supervisor as “inspiring and helpful.” An MLitt student who had originally planned to do a PhD in a department in another faculty said that he found the staff structure in English Language less hierarchical and the style of teaching very different. He said that he had found staff very helpful in allowing him to audit additional classes. PhD students in the Department were also “very helpful.” The Panel met some of these students in their role as GTAs and they, interestingly, described their teaching as a “positive experience” and the Department as “unique” and “very supportive,” one in which one could “go to very busy people and they will still take time to advise and help.”
- 5.6.5 The Review Panel had learned that teaching in the Medieval and Renaissance Studies programme came from a large number of departments, thus affording ample possibilities for things to go wrong. Students on the programme suggested, however, that this had not been their experience. The programme knitted well together and what particularly impressed the Panel were the reports of how considerable trouble was taken to find an appropriate supervisor for a student’s choice of dissertation topic. Beyond the remit of the review, but indicative of the general ethos discovered by the Panel, it was reported by masters students that the Head of Department was also very supportive in finding research funding.
- 5.6.6 Pressed to suggest something that would make their masters programmes even better, one student suggested a class meeting given over to a question and answer session. Not everyone agreed; for example, another student suggested that there were already sufficient opportunities for raising questions and a session devoted to this would be something of a waste of time.
- 5.6.7 The Review Panel had an interesting discussion of personal development planning (PDP) led by Professor Thompson from Queen’s University Belfast who noted from the SER that the Department had not yet fully committed itself to taking this forward though it was considering use of the software *Mahara*. *Mahara* is described as “a fully featured electronic portfolio, weblog, resume builder and social networking system, connecting users and creating online communities, ... [providing] the tools to set up a personal learning and development environment.”¹⁹ Professor Thompson reported that in his experience staff as well as students resented the imposition of PDP though they were reasonably comfortable with a light touch approach in which elements of typical programmes, such as recording progress and CV development, were made available for students who wanted them.
- 5.6.8 Several of the groups to whom the Review Panel spoke echoed these views. Staff in the Department said that PDP was not easy to sell to the students who found it patronising, something they had done at school, and something which they did automatically. There was, the staff said, a danger of introspective reflection being over-emphasised at the expense of learning and doing, and there was also an administrative burden to be considered. The Head of Department said that PDP was about students thinking about how they present

¹⁹ From the web pages of the University of London Computing Centre

themselves in the future. Whether or not the Department had explicitly signed up to the PDP agenda, Honours students said that the staff *made* them think about their future careers.

5.7 *The Quality of Learning Opportunities*

5.7.1 The present report has inevitably referred in several places already to the quality of learning opportunities afforded by the Department and the Review Panel **commends** the Department for the “explicit attention given to ‘learning how to learn’ in Level 1 ... in line with the QAA’s recent emphasis on enhancing the First-Year Experience.”²⁰ The SER reported in an earlier passage that the Department monitored student workloads closely, its “aim above all [being] for students to take a committed, self-reflective and professional approach to their academic work, enabling them to do well in their future careers.”²¹ It was also clear that the Department took an inclusive and collegial approach to its students who had a sense of being admitted to membership of an academic community.

5.7.2 All of the staff who met the Review Panel, and not least the Head of Department, displayed considerable enthusiasm for their work, acknowledging challenges but suggesting a confidence that these would be overcome by skill, imagination or sheer hard work. The students at all levels who met the Panel confirmed this impression by witnessing to the quality of the Department’s teaching characterised even among the GTAs by a passion for their subject. One Honours student described her time in the Department as “fantastic so far,” adding, “I’m the only one of my group from school who loves her course.” More than anything the students at all levels characterised the Department as “very friendly” exemplified by the fact that staff “make an effort to learn our names.” Students at Levels 1 and 2 spoke of the enthusiasm of staff in their teaching and about being surprised to discover how interesting the subject was. One of them said that GTAs were “much more approachable than in other subjects.”

5.7.3 The SER called attention to the bespoke materials prepared for undergraduate courses in the Department, and the external subject specialists confirmed the high quality of these. Honours students were, appropriately, expected to read widely but resources provided by the Department included ‘gateway’ websites developed under the umbrella of SESLL’s Software for the Teaching of English Language and Literature, and its Assessment (STELLA). The STELLA Laboratory is long established but, since the last review of the Department, “the Faculty has developed a high-specification Experimental Phonetics Laboratory (EPL) and an on-site Speech Studio with anaechoic properties; the EPL, which is supported by the STELLA Manager, and the Speech Studio are key resources for both Honours and postgraduate students, and allow students to access major research resources developed for (e.g.) the Glasgow Accent Project.”²² Honours students made a point of telling the Review Panel that the STELLA Laboratory was an excellent asset.

5.7.4 PGT students who spoke to the Review Panel were very comfortable with the quality of learning opportunities and said how much they appreciated the small class sizes, these typically containing only five students. The Department organises weekly departmental talks which, although pitched at a research level, are open to all. These contributed to one of the GTAs describing the

²⁰ Self Evaluation Report §3.7.3

²¹ Self Evaluation Report §3.4.14

²² Self Evaluation Report §3.7.4

present phase of his career as delivering “the best experiences in my academic development.”

5.8 *Resources for Learning and Teaching (Staffing)*

- 5.8.1 It has been noted already²³ that the Department had had to adjust in the current session to some staff retirements and absences. The Review Panel learned that the Department had received additional GTA money to help it to cope and the Panel was therefore interested to explore the selection and training of GTAs. The relatively high number of PhD students in the Department²⁴ reduced the scale of the problem and the Head of Department reported that research students were not asked to do any teaching in their first year. Although there is no requirement thereafter, there is an expectation that research students will take Level 1 / 2 tutorials in their second year, and give some Honours lectures in their third year. Level 1 / 2 tutors are given briefing notes, and new appointees are observed fairly closely. Thereafter, the Department relies on student feedback to ensure that teaching quality is maintained.
- 5.8.2 The GTAs whom the Panel met said that they liked the workshop books and tutor guides, and reported that the support they received from permanent staff was excellent and included fortnightly meetings with course conveners. There was also Faculty guidance on assessment standards. They confirmed what the Panel had already heard from the Head of Department that the amount of teaching they were allowed to do was capped so that the teaching they did was not overwhelming. All had completed the GTA Statutory training provided by the Learning and Teaching Centre, and some had completed the GTA Module (non-statutory). Some had reservations about their teaching being compulsorily observed and appraised. On the whole they were more comfortable with a regime in which they could ask for observation and feedback. Professor Upton reported that at Leeds a specialist from another discipline would watch and comment on an assistant’s teaching performance – with the focus clearly on technique rather than content, this had the effect of reducing the inevitable tensions. Some GTAs reported having given short lectures with the rest of their peer group observing. The Panel suggested that they might occasionally sit in on lectures given by permanent staff. Those who had done some Honours teaching said that they liked the way they could integrate their own research interests. The Panel, and particularly the external members, were very impressed by how effectively this seemed to work for both tutors and undergraduates.
- 5.8.3 The Review Panel found in the Department’s management of teaching several exemplars of good practice. Specifically, it liked (a) the fact of the annual teaching meeting, which all staff were required to attend, being timetabled outside research leave dates, (b) the system for mentoring of new staff, (c) the team-based approach to course delivery, and (d) the use of a transparent workload model, this recognising pastoral support of students, to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of work.
- 5.8.4 The Review Panel was impressed by the strategy which informed staff recruitment to the Department. Central to this strategy was the concept of ‘pairing’ in which each member of staff should be aligned with a colleague capable of covering teaching responsibilities. On the research front the object was to establish complementary interests. The model was a complex one and

²³ See above paragraph 2.1

²⁴ See above paragraph 2.3

the new professorial appointment (arriving in the summer) will look also for a 'pair' in English Literature.

- 5.8.5 In response to a question from the Review Panel about the labour-intensiveness of masters courses, staff said that that was not their impression and that, because their students were very good, they contributed to the Department's RAE score through co-authorship of published papers. But staff also said that they were desperately short-handed. They acknowledged that they were relying heavily on continuing the stream of research income, and on employing GTAs, but recognised that there were things that GTAs could not be asked to do.
- 5.8.6 One colleague referred to SESLL as having been originally a "marriage of convenience" but said that it was now a solid and fruitful relationship. The Department had always shared courses with Scottish Literature but now it shared courses also with English Literature. The Panel noted that the cross-disciplinary interests of the Department were well illustrated by the location in English Language of the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.
- 5.8.7 Some members of the Review Panel met the single probationer lecturer in the Department to discuss issues specific to her induction. She said that she had found the transition from research assistant to lecturer very smooth and well managed. Having until January 2009 been a post-doctoral research assistant, she had met the Head of Department to review attainment of the previous year's P&DR objectives and discuss what, in terms of teaching, administration and research, she hoped to achieve in the year ahead. These became her probationary objectives and had subsequently been sent to the New Lecturer / Teacher Development Group. She reported that in this, the first year of her appointment, her workload was not unduly heavy. She referred to an overlap in teaching and research interests with her mentor and confirmed the message heard in other meetings that, in this Department, research informed teaching, and vice versa. The probationer also reported full participation in the New Lecturer and Teacher Programme organised by the Learning and Teaching Service which she described as very useful.

5.9 *Resources for Learning and Teaching (Other Resources)*

- 5.9.1 The Review Panel discussed aspects of the Department's accommodation some of which had been highlighted in the SER as being less than optimal²⁵. Professor Smith reported that minor works had been carried out to facilitate disabled access though it was almost impossible to solve all of the problems presented by such a building. Some of the staff accommodation was particularly limiting. Honours students said that Room 1, the main teaching room in the Department, was too small, being quite congested when the chairs were fitted with their tablet arms. The Panel recognised the constraints on University budgets but felt that this particular Department deserved better.
- 5.9.2 The main complaint made by staff, however, concerned not the Department's own accommodation but the recent refurbishment of general teaching rooms managed by Estates & Buildings and, specifically, how teaching monitors had not been included with the new kit, this resulting in their having constantly to be looking over their shoulders at the main monitors. The Review Panel understood that this problem was, however, now being remedied. They complained also about missing lecterns and how they were simply moved from

²⁵ Self Evaluation Report §1.9 and §3.8.6

one room to another in response to complaint. The Panel heard also that there was a problem generally when hardware and software were upgraded because this was typically done without reference to the fonts required for the representation of Old English and Phonetics. It was clearly disconcerting for staff to discover, in front of a class, that the special fonts on which they relied had disappeared. The manager of the STELLA Laboratory took the opportunity to submit a plea for some dedicated technical support, even if only at the level of 0.1 FTE. When this issue was raised with the Dean in the final meeting of the day Professor Moignard suggested that this level of support could perhaps be provided by the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII). The Panel was entirely persuaded by the case made for support and **recommends** that the solution proposed by the Dean be explored and, if not viable, that an alternative be sought.

- 5.9.3 Taught postgraduate students expressed their satisfaction with the University Library, and with the effectiveness of the Short Loan Collection in sharing a limited resource among students who would otherwise be in competition for it. Honours students said that they particularly liked the fact that so much of the material they might use was now available online.

6. Maintaining the Standards of Awards

The Review Panel did not discuss the mechanisms by which the Department maintained its standard of awards. Maintaining standards was clearly dependent on External Examiners' reports and the experience of members of the Department's staff themselves examining at other institutions. The Panel studied the ample number of External Examiners' reports submitted by the Department, and found them entirely satisfactory, a view which was particularly endorsed by Professor Thompson and Professor Upton, the external specialists.

7. Assuring and Enhancing the Quality of the Students' Learning Experience

- 7.1 The Review Panel was satisfied that the Department employed a range of methods to ensure that the programmes it delivered met its own very high standards. It complied with quality assurance criteria in encouraging, collecting and examining feedback from students, formally and informally, and of using this feedback to inform review of its provision.
- 7.2 The quality enhancement ethos is one which is based on the assumption that if one doesn't move forward one moves back. The resolution of this paradox is that in something as complex as the delivery of programmes of teaching, learning and assessment, changes in delivery systems, and in the environment in which the teaching and learning are transacted, are inevitable. In order to maintain standards it is necessary to assess the challenges and opportunities resulting from such change. The Review Panel was entirely satisfied that the Department had a clear and appropriate vision of the ideal learning experience and that it had demonstrated commitment and enthusiasm for delivering something as close to that ideal as available resources would permit.

8. Summary of Perceived Strengths and Areas for Improvement in Learning and Teaching

Key Strengths

- Commitment to the delivery of an undergraduate programme in English Language, English Linguistics and Philology in accordance with QAA benchmarks and the Department's traditional strengths, and complementing the work of cognate departments in SESLL.
- Support for masters programmes which blur the distinction between taught and research strands of postgraduate work, this resulting in cohorts of satisfied and enthusiastic MLitt students as well as a rich stream of doctoral candidates.
- Enthusiasm for research and teaching – the latter, notably, from Level 1 upwards - as complementary components of academic life.
- Inclusive attitude towards students which has stimulated their appetite for learning and generated an unusual degree of loyalty and affection.
- Commitment to student support at the level of the individual student.
- Mutuality among staff which in its formal presentation is revealed in 'pairing' to cover teaching commitments but informally presents in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere which students at all levels find liberating and enabling.

Areas to be improved or enhanced

- Increased recruitment to Level 1 both locally and from schools in England.
- Adjustment to changes in the structure of the academic year.
- Consistent presentation in its simplest terms of the grading system embedded in the Code of Assessment.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The Review Panel was very impressed by the commitment demonstrated by the Department to its taught programmes but even more to its students as individual learners. The amount of time that staff seemed to be prepared to give to students was very generous and, although this might accord with abstracts such as retention policy, the Panel did not hear that expression used. It was clear that systems had been developed to facilitate the identification of students in difficulties but these are dependent on teaching and administrative staff doing a great deal of work. The result is not, however, a Department characterised as bureaucratic and officious but, rather, as one that is efficient and above all welcoming and friendly.

Recommendations

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department of English Language. It is important to note that some of these recommendations refer to tasks or issues identified by the Department for action either prior to the Review or in the SER. Some of these actions are already in hand.

The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer. They are ranked in order of priority.

Recommendation 1:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department develops the strategies it was already considering to increase future recruitment to Level 1 which, it was anticipated, would result in greater numbers of students at Level 2 and in Honours. [paragraph 5.5.4]

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

Recommendation 2:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department keeps under review student take-up of opportunities for study abroad and that, if students prove unwilling or unable to subscribe to the proposed longer absence from Glasgow, the subject be raised for discussion in SESLL and at Faculty where other possible remedies might be sought. [paragraph 4.5]

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

Recommendation 3:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department revisits the statements of its ILOs and that it revises these as appropriate in order to conform with the published guidance. [paragraph 5.2.1]

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

Recommendation 4:

With respect to the problem of technical support in the STELLA Laboratory, the Review Panel recommends that the solution proposed by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts that this might be provided by HATII should be explored and, if not viable, that an alternative be sought. [paragraph 5.9.2]

For the attention of: **the Dean of the Faculty of Arts**

Recommendation 5:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department proceeds with its undertaking to review, and amend as appropriate, its presentation to students of the assessment regulations. [paragraph 5.3.7]

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

Recommendation 6:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department revises the Programme Specification for the MLitt in Medieval and Renaissance Studies so that the ILOs accurately reflect the criteria on which assessment will be made and that redundant criteria are removed. [paragraph 5.3.8]

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

Recommendation 7:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department considers the feasibility of providing feedback on Honours essays orally as a matter of course. [paragraph 5.3.6]

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

Last modified on: Monday 18 May 2009