University of Glasgow

Periodic Subject Review (PSR)

Review of Philosophy held on 12 and 13 March 2014

Report Summary

The following is a brief summary of the full report of the review carried out in the subject area of Philosophy. *Periodic Subject Review* is an internal subject review focused on the quality of provision as experienced by students. The review looks at the range of programmes, course content, the teaching methods employed, assessment, facilities and much more.

The full report of the review is available publicly at:

http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_357279_en.pdf

Further information about the PSR process can be found at:

http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/senateoffice/qea/periodicsubjectreview/

Italicised words are explained in a glossary below.

Key Strengths

- Excellent student centred learning environment.
- High levels of engagement and commitment from all staff.
- High quality learning and teaching.
- A strong sense of cohesion and community within the Subject Area.
- Good pastoral and peer support available to students.
- An active, well organised Philosophy Society which is entirely independent of the Subject and University, but which no doubt adds value to the learning experience of students within the Subject.
- The Subject's use of reading parties.
- Provision of on essay writing, exemplars of assessed work and contextualised assessment criteria within the subject through practical exercises for Honours level.
- The high levels of detailed and timely formative feedback provided to students.

- A high quality, reflective *Self Evaluation Report (SER)* which was developed in consultation with staff and students.

Areas to be improved or enhanced

- The balance of undergraduate assessments, particularly at Honours which is heavily weighted towards examination.

- Limited evidence of guidance on assessment criteria or technique at sub-honours level.

- Awareness of *Graduate Attributes* and *Employability* developed through the study of Philosophy should be improved.

- The current accommodation arrangements for Level 1 and 2 lectures are unsatisfactory.

- A review of the current curriculum across all levels is required.

- More frequent coordinated review of the curriculum is required in the future.

- Collaboration on joint course development with other subjects should be considered.

- The *staff to student ratio (SSR)* is high.

- The quality, availability and awareness of *intended learning outcomes (ILOs)* should be improved.

- The provision of *Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)* should be placed on more certain terms financially.

- Formal training for GTAs should be embedded in policy and process.

- More effective advertising of PGT programmes is needed.

- Diverse routes to the recruitment of PGR students should be explored.

- Setting and maintaining the standards of awards.

- Consistent use of University systems for course design and approval should be ensured.

Commendations[1]

The Quality of Learning Opportunities

- The excellent student centred learning environment, sense of community, and pastoral and peer support available to students. The Panel was impressed by the level of praise that students had for the staff within the Subject. Undergraduate and postgraduate students believed that both staff and students were part of a community and that staff were approachable and passionate about their subject.

- 'Reading Parties' used to introduce students to one another and to staff, and a range of social activities helped to cement the sense of cohesion felt by students. The Subject fortunate to have a very active and well organised Philosophy Society which is entirely independent of the Subject and University, but which no doubt adds value to the learning experience of students within the Subject. The Subject may want to consider setting down, or formalising in some way, the key elements which create the excellent environment for students so that any good practice could be identified and shared with others. *[Paragraph 3.7.4]*

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[1] Numbers refer to the paragraphs in the full report that contain the relevant discussion.

Assessment

- Provision of guidance on essay writing, makes available exemplars of assessed work and contextualises assessment criteria through practical exercises at Honours level. *[Paragraph 3.2.9]*

Feedback

- The level of formative feedback provided to students and timely availability. It was clear that there had been a concerted response to *NSS* scores in this area, which were above the College and University averages, but lower than the scores in other areas of the survey for Philosophy. The Subject had also responded to student feedback and had moved to an online submission, checking, marking and feedback system using *Turnitin*. *[Paragraph 3.3.2]*

Resources for Learning and Teaching

- The use of reading parties was considered good practice. Students were clear that the reading parties were of great educational value and were not seen only as an opportunity to socialise or get to know other students and staff, although this was also clearly a benefit to all involved. *[Paragraph 3.8.8]*

Self-Evaluation Report (SER)

- The quality of the Self Evaluation Report (SER) and on the way that staff and students were engaged in its development and in the wider Periodic Subject Review. Over the course of the review, staff members explained that whilst the majority of the SER had been written and edited by a small team of key staff members, there had been Subject-wide consultation and opportunities for input. The Periodic Subject review had been discussed at the *Staff-Student Liaison Committee* (also the Subject Learning and Teaching Committee) and students had been made aware of the review on *Moodle* and had been invited via email to attend meetings that took place during the review visit. *[Paragraph 1.2.3]*

Recommendations

Assessment

- Reconsider the balance of the assessment methods used and whether there is merit in reducing the amount of credit awarded on the basis of assessment by examination, particularly at Honours. The Subject should explore the balance of assessment methods used in cognate subjects to determine current practice in other parts of the University. *[Paragraph 3.2.7]*

- Provision of the guidance on essay writing and provision of exemplars of assessed work and contextualised assessment criteria to be extended to all students and not just Honours students. Possibly through the provision of lecture input at sub-honours level, through work in seminars, and through the use of the VLE to provide exemplars. *[Paragraph 3.2.10]*

Curriculum Design, Development and Content

- Undertake a comprehensive review of the curriculum at all levels, as a full review has not been conducted within the last 10 years. Whilst the currency of curriculum content is not in question, the Subject should review the content of courses to ensure the continued coherence of programmes, including progression across levels. The Subject should contact and consult with

the Academic Development Unit within *the Learning and Teaching Centre* for advice.[2] The Panel suggests allocating some dedicated time to undertake this review, such as a staff away day or similar. It is also important that the Subject use the opportunity of review to address other recommendations dealt with in the review report in a coordinated way. *[Paragraph 3.5.11]*

- Consider how it may collaborate with other subjects to jointly develop interdisciplinary courses. The Subject should consider where it may beneficially collaborate with other subjects, particularly in cognate areas such as Theological and Religious Studies and Classical Studies. *[Paragraph 3.6.8]*

- The College of Arts and the College of Social Sciences consider whether the changes to the regulations, stipulating credit requirements within the Colleges at Level 1 and 2, are appropriately balanced against student choice and programme flexibility. *[Paragraph 3.6.3]*

Learning and Teaching Enhancement

- Consider how awareness could be raised of the contribution the study of Philosophy makes to the development of *Graduate Attributes* and *employability* skills. This should include consideration of providing input to students studying at all levels on the relevance of uniquely philosophical skills, and on the value of these skills in other contexts. The Panel acknowledges that the Subject had recognised the importance of this area in the *SER* and welcomes their plans to offer further Philosophy-specific guidance to students. It also encourages the Subject to continue signposting external sources of information to students. *[Paragraph 2.2.3]*

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

- Undertake (as a matter of urgency with regard to the MLitt Conversion) a comprehensive review of all *ILOs* at programme and course level to ensure that:
    - they are consistent with both programme and course level aims;
    - ILOs are consistent with University guidance on ILO structure, language and subsequently with the principle of constructive alignment;
    - ILOs are appropriate to the intended level of study and the corresponding *SCQF Level*.

  This review of ILOs should be undertaken as part of a wider curriculum review, which is addressed separately in the recommendation above. *[Paragraph 3.1.5]*

- Consider how all ILOs can be made available to students, and how the Subject might raise awareness of them, so that students understand what they are expected to demonstrate at assessment. *[Paragraph 6.1.6]*

Maintaining the Standards of Awards

- As a matter of urgency and alongside the recommendation at 3.1.5, develop formalised courses, approved through *PIP*, which have appropriate ILOs at *SCQF* level 11 and appropriate assessment to form part of the MLitt Conversion programme. Whilst it is acceptable for MLitt students to share teaching with Honours students they must be enrolled on courses at the appropriate level and with an appropriate credit value to ensure that the requirements for the award of MLitt are met. *[Paragraph 4.1.2]*

- Alongside a curriculum review, the Subject should ensure all programmes and course *specifications* are current and complete, and that all courses are detailed in full in the *Programme Information Process (PIP)* and are therefore included in the course catalogue. No

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[2] For guidance on review see:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/learningteaching/resourcesforstaff/goodpracticeresources/programmeandcoursedesignandreview/

programme specifications were available online for any of the current taught postgraduate programmes. Programmes were, however, showing in MyCampus and appearing on student transcripts perhaps indicating that the official approval process had not been followed correctly. The Panel recommends that the *Academic Standards Committee* explore whether any action is required to ensure that all course and programme specifications are complete and that all courses and programmes are subject to the proper approval processes. *[Paragraph 4.1.3]*

Resources for Learning and Teaching

- In liaison with the School of Humanities, consider how further progress may be made in reducing the student to staff ratio within the Subject Area. *[Paragraph 3.9.2]*

- Accommodation used for large Level 1 and 2 lectures in Philosophy to be reviewed. Venues for these lectures should be sufficient to cope with the student numbers involved. Ideally there should not be a different location for every lecture as this creates complexity for staff and students. The Subject had previously made attempts to rectify this problem and recognised the stress placed on accommodation resources generally across the University. *[Paragraph3.9.5]*

- Consider the possibility and resource implications of making a study space available to postgraduate students. *[Paragraph 3.9.7]*

- Together with the School of Humanities and the College of Arts, consider what options are available to secure an adequate, consistent and dedicated budget for the provision of *Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs);* conducting a risk assessment relating to the continued availability of GTAs and, if necessary, put in place sufficient mechanisms to minimise the risk of over-reliance upon GTAs. In undertaking this, the Subject is encouraged to reflect on the College of Arts policy on the role of GTAs. *[Paragraph 3.9.10]*

- In liaison with Human Resources (HR), review the current individual contractual arrangements in place for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). This review should take into account guidance from HR on the point at which GTAs should be placed on fractional contracts of employment, rather than zero hours or atypical contracts. The Subject should liaise with GTAs on this issue, seeking their views and suggestions. It was the view of the Panel that the Subject was under the false impression that the total worked hours of any GTAs should be limited so as not to exceed a specified earnings cap – whereas Corporate Human Resources had clarified that this was not the current University policy. The priority was to ensure that workers were on the most appropriate type of contract. *[Paragraph 3.9.11]*

- The College HR Manager should clarify with Corporate HR the position on 'earnings caps' and ensure this position is effectively communicated to Schools and Subjects. *[Paragraph 3.9.12]*

- The amount of training formally provided to Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), and embedded in the policies and processes of the Subject, properly reflects the guidance issued by the Learning and Teaching Centre. A minimum of two half-day training opportunities should be provided to hourly paid teaching staff. The Panel did recognise that the Subject provided informal support and guidance to GTAs and some more formal training and mentoring through observations and feedback.

- Continue to liaise with the Head of School Administration on the issue of the location of administrative staff and suggests that options to alleviate issues created at a Subject level be explored in further detail. The situation should also be reviewed in light of the forthcoming appointment of 2 additional members of administrative staff at School level. *[Paragraph 3.9.16]*

Student Recruitment

- Give further consideration to how and to whom the postgraduate study of Philosophy at Glasgow might be promoted. In particular it should consider the promotion of *PGT* Philosophy

to students within other subjects at the University and in particular to students within the College of Arts. The Subject should contact the *Recruitment and International Office* for advice. *[Paragraph 3.6.6]*

- Consider the development of other routes to the recruitment of *PGR* students and make efforts to enhance these. The Subject should contact the Recruitment and International Office for advice on recruitment. *[Paragraph 3.6.7]*

- The University consider how it might support and incentivise the development of joint courses and programmes across Subject Areas. It recognised that on occasion professional accreditation can limit potential for this kind of collaboration. *[Paragraph 3.6.9]*

Overall aims at undergraduate and postgraduate levels

- Review the programme aims of the MLitt Philosophy (General) and MLitt Philosophy (Conversion) programmes to ensure that these are clearly explained and available. It was suggested by the Panel that some of the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) from the MLitt programmes may be better suited as programme *aims. [Paragraph 2.1.3]*

Glossary of terms/acronyms used

Academic Standards Committee (ASC)

The Academic Standards Committee is a sub-committee of Education Policy and Strategy Committee (EdPSC), a key functional committee of the University. The role of the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) is to assist EdPSC in its implementation of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, through assurance and enhancement of the quality of educational provision and through maintenance of standards. ASC reports to EdPSC, and also approves proposals for undergraduate and postgraduate taught degree programmes on behalf of EdPSC and Senate.

Employability

Employability is about more than being able to get a job after University. It is about acknowledging and being able to demonstrate achievements, understanding and personal attributes that will contribute to success both during, and after, University.

Graduate Attributes

Graduate attributes are the skills, knowledge and qualities or attitudes developed by individuals through their programme of study that they will use to contribute effectively in work or other aspects of society in the future.

Graduate Teaching Assistant or GTAs

Graduate Teaching Assistants, Tutors and Laboratory Demonstrators are students, usually research students, who assist with teaching in the form of tutorials, labs and other activities that are part of undergraduate programmes in the Subject/School. They are paid an hourly rate by the University.

Intended Learning Outcomes or ILOs

Intended Learning Outcomes or ILOs describe what all students should be able to do or demonstrate, in terms of particular knowledge and understanding, qualities, skills and other attributes when they successfully complete the course or programme that the ILOs relate to.

Learning and Teaching Centre

The Learning and Teaching Centre is a University Service whose role is to "help implement and develop the University's Learning and Teaching strategy, identify, assess and disseminate new developments and good practice which serve to enhance the student learning experience, and will work with colleagues throughout the University to bring about change".

Moodle

Moodle is the University's supported Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

National Student Survey (NSS)

The NSS is a national initiative that has been conducted annually since 2005. The survey asks students in their final year of a programme to provide feedback on their student learning experience. There are 22 questions in all, this can be found at: http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/

Periodic Subject Review or PSR

The University has a six yearly cycle of review of the Subjects/Schools within it. The PSR is one of the main ways by which the University assures itself of the quality of the provision delivered by Subjects/Schools.

Postgraduate Research or PGR

Postgraduate Research refers to research programmes at postgraduate level, usually PhD. In some Colleges and Graduate Schools, students undertaking PGR studies may also be registered simply as research students and not for a specific degree.

Postgraduate Taught or PGT

Postgraduate Taught refers to taught programmes at postgraduate level, usually Masters.

Programme Information Process (PIP)

PIP is a University web system for staff to propose and approve new and changed programmes and courses and to view information on live programmes and courses.

Programme Specifications

Programme specifications are documents that aim to provide the core factual information about a programme of study to a range of stakeholders, including students or potential students, e.g. Level of award, number of credits, programme aims, intended learning outcomes, etc.

Recruitment and International Office (RIO)

The Recruitment and International Office (RIO) provides applicants, parents and teachers with a single point of contact for information and advice on the range of programmes available at the University of Glasgow. The Service also develop, implement, co-ordinate and monitors widening participation initiatives within the University and with other partners. The Recruitment and International Office (RIO) is situated in the Fraser Building.

SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework)

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework promotes lifelong learning in Scotland. The Framework includes all mainstream qualifications in Scotland and provides support to learning providers and employers. It provides a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities and thereby makes the relationships between qualifications clearer. It clarifies entry and exit points, and routes for progression within and across education and training sectors and increase the opportunities

for credit transfer. In these ways it assists learners to plan their progress and minimise duplication of learning.

Self Evaluation Report (SER)

A Self Evaluation Report is a document prepared by the Subject(s)/School in advance of a PSR Review. Its purpose is to provide the Review Panel with an insight into the Subject(s)/School's view of itself, its strengths and areas it would wish to develop. It is normally prepared by the Head of School in conjunction with other staff but students should also be offered the opportunity to comment on whether or not it reflects the Subject(s)/School they know.

Staff:Student Liaison Committee or SSLCs

Staff:Student Liaison Committees are Subject/School committees which provide a formal opportunity for Student Representatives to discuss matters with, and give feedback to their subject area.

Staff:Student Ratios (SSRs)

The Staff:Student Ratio describes the number of students to each member of staff, either in the Subject/School, College or University.

Turnitin

Turnitin is a remotely hosted, web based service that compares submitted material, e.g. a student's essay, with a wide range of sources and produces an originality report. It is intended to be a tool which can support students in their understanding and avoidance of plagiarism and can be used to quickly and efficiently locate sources of material in cases of suspected plagiarism. Turnitin originality reports can be used to highlight to students, with real examples, the exact meaning of the term plagiarism.