

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 30 May 2008

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Report of the Review of Economic and Social History held on 10
March 2008**

Mr Jim Craig, Clerk to the Review Panel

May 2008

Review Panel:

Professor Neal Juster	Vice Principal (Strategy and Resources), Convener
Dr Francesca Carnevali	University of Birmingham, External Subject Specialist
Mr Zhaofeng Zhou	Students' Representative Council
Dr Moira Fischbacher	Department of Management, Cognate Department
Dr Laura Martin	Senate Assessor on Court
Dr Vicky Gunn	Learning and Teaching Centre
Mr Jim Craig	Senate Office, Clerk to the Review Panel

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Department of Economic and Social History, which celebrated its golden jubilee in 2007, is one of nine departments in the Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences (LBSS). With three of these – the departments of Accounting and Finance, Economics and Management – it is aligned as the University of Glasgow Business School. The Department is not, however, confined by Faculty boundaries and is a constituent of the School of Historical Studies in which, with the Department of History and the University Archives Service, it works to secure coordination of research and postgraduate teaching across the wider discipline. The Department embraces the Centre for the History of Medicine and the externally funded Centre for Business History in Scotland, and considers its other main strengths to lie in gender and social history.
- 1.2 The Department last underwent internal review in January 2001 and, with the Department of History, was subject to external review by the Quality Assurance Agency in 2001-02, the report being published in April 2002. The formal outcome of the latter was the statement that the reviewers had confidence in the academic standards achieved by the programmes delivered by these departments. The quality of teaching and learning, of student progression, and of learning resources were all found to be commendable. Finally, the report stated that the reviewers had “full confidence in the ability of the two Departments and the institution to maintain and enhance quality and standards in the history programmes.”
- 1.3 The 2007-08 Self Evaluation Report (SER) was prepared by Dr Duncan Ross, Quality Enhancement Officer and a senior member of the Department, in close consultation

with the Head of Department, Dr Neil Rollings. A draft of the report was circulated and discussed at a Department meeting following which it was revised and discussed again at a special meeting of staff, Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and student representatives. The Review Panel found the finished version to be a careful and thoughtful study, exceptionally well written, and informed by an awareness of University strategy especially in respect of contemporary enhancement issues. The SER, further, proved extremely useful to the Panel's conduct of the review.

1.4 On its visit to the Department, the Review Panel met

- the Dean, Professor Noreen Burrows;
- the Head of Department, Dr Neil Rollings with the principal author of the SER, Dr Duncan Ross;
- nine other members of the Department's staff including, separately, the single probationary staff member;
- five GTAs who ranged in experience from a post-doctoral student, who had been taking Level 1 tutorials for four years, to one who was just beginning his PhD;
- three current PGT students and two who had completed MSc degrees in 2006-07;
- 18 undergraduate students representing Levels 1 and 2 and Honours classes.

2. Background information

- 2.1 The Department has 12 academic members of staff excluding one professor currently on ESRC-funded research leave but including one lecturer (the probationary member of staff) on a short-term contract covering her absence, and one lecturer who is 50% funded by the Wellcome Trust. There are two administrative staff and a further 0.14 FTE support from the Centre for the History of Medicine's administrator.
- 2.2 In 2005 the Department moved from University Gardens to the recently refurbished Lilybank House - adjacent to the Adam Smith Building – and all Honours and some pre-Honours teaching is now located there.
- 2.3 Staffing has been very stable over the last few years and, since its last review, only one person has left the Department for a post elsewhere. Retirements and opportunities for expansion have, however, permitted new appointments to refresh the teaching and research mix.
- 2.4 Student numbers for 2007-08 were as follows:

	Head count
Level 1 (first semester)	162
Level 2 (first semester)	75
Level 3	1
Junior & Senior Honours	65
Undergraduate Total	303
Postgraduate Taught	17
Postgraduate Research*	25

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

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

- MA in Social Sciences Single Honours in Economic and Social History.
- MSc in Contemporary Economic History.

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

- MA in Social Sciences.
- MA Joint Honours in Economic and Social History and another subject.
- MA in Social Sciences Joint Honours in Economic and Social History and another subject.
- MSc in Social History (jointly with the Department of History and the University of Strathclyde).
- MLitt/MSc in History (including the MSc in History with an emphasis on History of Medicine). These are joint programmes delivered by the School of Historical Studies.

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

- MA (Historical Studies) (Faculty of Arts)
- MSc China in the International Arena (Department of Politics)
- MSc Management (Business School)

Departmental independence and faculty associations

- 2.5 Having read the SER and the many other documents provided by the Department, the Review Panel approached its visit interested to discover whether the Department was itself inspired by a strategic vision that required some shift in direction from its present locus. The Panel was aware that there was no discrete QAA subject benchmark statement for Economic and Social History nor for either of the implied components, and the SER pointed out that the Department was now “one of only two remaining independent departments of economic or economic and social history in the UK.” The SER also drew attention to the administrative oversight which had resulted in a revised benchmarking document being sent by the Senate Office only to the Department of History. This report will discuss below (section 4.5) the recruitment problems which have challenged the viability of some of its courses if not whole programmes. It would have been remiss of the Panel not to question whether LBSS was the natural home for the Department, and indeed whether an existence separate from the Department of History in the Faculty of Arts made sense for the Department’s students and staff, the faculties concerned, or the University as a whole.
- 2.6 In the event, the Review Panel was thoroughly persuaded by the evidence it heard that the present arrangements worked very well. There was no suspicion that the links with the Department of History and with the Business School created tensions which might debilitate staff or divert their attention from pursuit of a coherent strategy. The Department took care to maintain its links with both and dismissed any idea that they might be mutually exclusive alternatives. At the same time it was very much at home in LBSS. It regarded Economic and Social History as a discipline in its own right and, while possessing affinities with History, was founded in social science methodologies. It looked for, and received, most of its research funding not from the Arts and Humanities Research Council but from the Economic and Social Research Council.
- 2.7 Informed by University strategy, the Department thought through, and compiled, its own planning priorities which fed into the development of the Faculty strategy document. For the Department this was very much a research focused strategy, and

this was reflected in the research income it generated and the number of PhDs it produced. But complementing this, rather than conflicting with it, was a strong commitment to teaching excellence and the inclusion of undergraduates in its concept of academic community.

- 2.8 The SER had laid considerable stress on the importance to the Department of nurturing a sense of just such a community and encouraging mutual support within a collegiate ethos. The Review Panel discovered that this was not pious aspiration but entirely justified and, in discussion with them, found that the staff as a whole spoke of their collegiality and collective sense of identity. They reported that they got on well together, and members of the Centre for the History of Medicine spoke of having been warmly welcomed into the Department. Its golden jubilee had been marked by celebrations in 2007 and staff spoke of these as having been energising and inspiring.
- 2.9 The view of staff that the Department was characterised by its friendliness was confirmed by other groups met by the Review Panel. The GTAs said that they found staff very accessible while the probationer lecturer said that he had found joining the Department a very positive experience and that colleagues had given much useful advice not to mention help with accommodation. Postgraduate students reported of staff that “people say hello, and your face gets known” and that the “lecturers were friendly and very approachable.” Undergraduates who were in a position to make comparisons with other departments also stressed the willingness of staff to make themselves available to students. The Panel **commends** the Department for the extent to which it has realised its objective of establishing a mutually supportive academic community, for the enthusiasm demonstrated by staff for their teaching which is seen as complementing their research rather than competing with it for their attention, and their commitment to their subject as an academic discipline.

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

- 3.1 The description of the Department's aims presented in its SER provided a persuasive account of the value of economic and social history as an academic discipline with an essential role in the development of social and economic policy, nationally and internationally. The Department's commitment to research and teaching in the discipline was unequivocal. Equally telling was its analysis of the contribution that undergraduate and postgraduate study in the Department could make to the development of informed, thoughtful and inquisitive minds. In this respect the aims of the Department's provision are entirely consonant with the University's Strategic Plan.
- 3.2 The statement of the Department's aims had, however, nothing to say that touched upon the subject of internationalisation and indeed the SER introduced it with the admission that the Department “experienced significant challenges in responding to the University's agenda” in this area. The Review Panel pursued this with the Head of Department who highlighted the contribution the Department made to the Business School's programmes which had been marketed very effectively overseas. In a subsequent meeting, staff referred specifically to the development of the Business School's BA in Global Business of which there were still high expectations. Staff referred also to the progress that had been made in attracting PGT students from elsewhere in the EU and said that, when at conferences abroad, they took the opportunity to talk to students who might be interested in the idea of postgraduate studies at Glasgow. As for encouraging home students to spend a year abroad, they said that most undergraduates seemed to find the prospect unattractive. Although it was increasingly possible to find courses overseas being taught in English, knowledge of the native language was usually required for working with primary source material. The Panel **recommends** that the Department give further consideration to the

contribution it might make to increasing overseas recruitment and helping home students overcome the obstacles that accounted for very limited take-up of opportunities for study abroad. In doing so the Panel acknowledged that the SER had identified the need for more work in this area, and that Department staff had recognised the challenges and demonstrated a clear willingness to address them.

4. Evaluation of the student learning experience

4.1 Aims

Personal development planning (PDP) and the Employability Strategy

4.1.1 As the Review Panel sought to explore how well the Department's degree courses demonstrated commitment to PDP and the Employability Strategy, it found ample realisation (see section 4.2 below) of the aim expressed in the SER that the Department sought to develop in its students "a variety of listening, researching, analytical, communication and IT-based skills." While the Department looked for the development of PDP tools to be taken forward at Faculty level, the Researching Economic and Social History (RESH) courses in Junior and Senior Honours (see paragraph 4.4.2 below) required students to keep introspective journals recording their progress. The Panel took the view that this provision was understated in the Programme Specification and suggested that when this document is revisited it should lay greater emphasis on the opportunities available to students with respect to PDP. The Department was aware that few appointments notices appearing in the press were headed *Economic or Social Historian*, but it recognised that employment opportunities for graduates with the range of skills listed among the intended learning outcomes of its courses were numerous, and this was something which staff sought to convey to their students. The Head of Department informed the Panel that four MSPs were numbered among the Department's graduates, and that they had been invited to return and talk to students about employment opportunities.

Research-led teaching

4.1.2 Central to the University's marketing of its teaching programmes is the proposition that, while teaching methods should reflect commitment to the individual student and application of student-centred learning methods, the content should be informed by current research and, as far as possible, delivered by those personally engaged in that research. The Department of Economic and Social History has adopted this principle as one of its central aims and, as reported below (paragraph 4.4.4), the Review Panel found clear evidence of its success in communicating enthusiasm for the currency of its curricula to its students.

Enjoyment of the learning experience

4.1.3 The Department's commitment to its own academic discipline, and its recognition of the realities of a competitive labour market, did not silence expression of the aim that students should enjoy their learning experience. Enjoyment of hard work can be something of an acquired taste and is, in any event, a sensation that may be capable of measurement only in relative terms. The students whom the Panel met were, however, clear in the comparisons that they offered that they enjoyed their experience of learning in this Department more than in others they knew.

Realisation of aims

4.1.4 The Review Panel welcomed the emphasis on a stimulating and eminently useful learning experience and, in discussion with both undergraduate and postgraduate students, heard evidence that these aims were being met. These students spoke of

reading lists which seemed to be more carefully targeted than those they received in other departments they mentioned, and described lectures as informative and lecturers as encouraging students to come to their own conclusions rather than necessarily adopting the interpretations preferred by staff. In keeping with its aims, even undergraduate students said that they felt that they participated in the life of the Department. The reading party in Junior Honours was described as being a good thing, not least for its effect on relations socially.

- 4.1.5 Aims expressed in terms of subject coverage were addressed more clearly in the *Structure and Features* section of the Programme Specifications, and from here, for the undergraduate programmes, the Review Panel was able to confirm their accord with the aims set out in the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for History. The Panel was assured also of the appropriateness of programme aims at all levels with the outcome descriptors in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

4.2 *Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)*

- 4.2.1 In the view of the Review Panel the Department's SER had conscientiously addressed the articulation of programme aims and ILOs at all levels of its provision. Equally it had provided convincing assurance that students, staff and External Examiners shared an understanding of ILOs at programme and course levels. It had demonstrated how local course and programme approval procedures ensured that all new proposals were discussed at Departmental meetings and in the Staff-Student Committee before proceeding to scrutiny at Faculty level. Student engagement with the scrutiny of proposals appeared to be taken seriously, and feedback from students was actively sought. External Examiners were consulted to ensure that proposed courses were appropriate within the discipline. Review of the ILOs of existing courses was assured through annual course monitoring procedures and in what the SER described as "the culture of critical engagement and reflection that suffuses the discussions" at the Teaching Review Group, in the Staff-Student Committee and elsewhere.
- 4.2.2 The assertions made in the SER were borne out in discussions with staff and students at all levels. The Panel was principally concerned to discover how programme level ILOs – particularly those relating to transferable and key skills – were delivered. Staff described components of the Honours RESH courses which were intended to provide an introduction to research sources and methods, and the opportunity to apply acquired knowledge and skills in a real project. But these courses also included individual assignments, self-directed group work, oral and written presentations, group minutes and individual log books in which each student recorded his or her own contributions as well as an assessment of what the other group members had brought to the project.
- 4.2.3 The Review Panel had seen from course documentation the emphasis that the Department placed on publication of ILOs, and it was able to confirm the effectiveness of this in discussion with undergraduate student groups who seemed fully aware of published ILOs and of their immediate relevance in the context of assessment and beyond.

4.3 *Assessment, Feedback and Achievement*

- 4.3.1 The SER quoted from the 2007 History Subject Benchmarking document in setting down the principles that assessment should be "explicit, transparent, consistent, fair and responsive to the variety of skill sets and achievements of students across the various programmes." The Review Panel was able to confirm that the Department had augmented the Code of Assessment's verbal descriptors with discipline-specific ones and that these were published in all course information documents. These documents also contained clear information on coursework submission dates, advice on

referencing the work of other authors, progression requirements and sources of support. Explanations as to how final assessment results are calculated were also given.

- 4.3.2 The Review Panel explored the links between the Department's programme and course ILOs and its choice of instruments of assessment, and found these appropriate and capable of measuring students' attainment of ILOs across the range of knowledge and skills to which they related. It also confirmed that the relationship between learning outcomes and assessment was discussed with students and understood by them.

Marking standards and other controls

- 4.3.3 Some of the evidence provided to the Review Panel suggested that 'A' grades were difficult to attain in Economic and Social History while lower grades were more common than in some other departments. When the Panel raised this with the Head of Department, he said that, in the past, this had been something of an issue, at least for marking at Levels 1 & 2, and had been the subject of discussion with the External Examiner. In meetings with students the Panel heard only that the marking was very fair. The basis on which marking was conducted was certainly well publicised and understood, and it was clear to the Panel that such transparency should encourage general confidence in the marking. Dr Rollings did indicate, however, that the introduction of two additional bands to Grade 'A' in Schedule A of the Code of Assessment had encouraged markers to award more 'A' grades. GTAs who had experience of other departments in the University suggested that the standard required in Economic and Social History was not higher than they recognised elsewhere but offered that the learning was more open-ended. Planning Office statistics received by the Panel showed that over three sessions 2004-05 to 2006-07 the Department had produced 90 Honours graduates almost equally divided between Single Honours (46) and Joint Honours (44). The distribution of classes was not, however, similarly balanced – 8 were awarded Firsts but only 2 of these took Single Honours while 6 were Joint Honours graduates, and those gaining Firsts or Upper Seconds were distributed 38 to 29, Joint to Single Honours. The Panel accepted that the numbers were too small to support firm conclusions, and acknowledged the possibility of these results being derived from the action of other variables, but drew them to the Department's attention for noting. Section 5 of this report confirms the Panel's confidence in the means by which the Department maintains the standards of its awards.
- 4.3.4 The SER had explained how consistency and equity in marking were routinely assured, and the Panel confirmed these arrangements when it visited the Department. At sub-Honours, all exam scripts receiving a mark below D2 were double-marked, and all 'A's and those below D2, as well as a small sample of other grades, were sent to the External Examiner for confirmation. At Honours all exam scripts were double-marked and all those awarded A, D, E, or F were passed to the External. At PGT level all assessments were double marked. Staff confirmed the arrangements for thoroughly checking exam question papers that were described in the SER. At Honours level, these were submitted to a Departmental scrutiny meeting before going to the External Examiner for final approval. The scrutiny meeting, according to the SER "reinforces a sense of collective ownership. It also has important reflective and strategic functions, in that it encourages all members of the Department to engage with the entire honours programme, and to identify areas of overlap, possible gaps in provision, best practice of colleagues, and opportunities for future development and collaboration."

Role of GTAs in assessing student performance

- 4.3.5 The Review Panel explored with the Head of Department the role played by GTAs in undergraduate assessment and the measures that were employed to ensure consistency. Dr Rollings said that GTAs they were not used at all for Honours assessment, nor for examinations marking at Levels 1 and 2, although they did mark essays at those levels.

The Head of Department advised the Panel, and the GTAs themselves subsequently confirmed, that academic staff gave the tutors as much support as the tutors wished. In their first year, all of the essays GTAs marked were moderated by a more experienced colleague. All GTAs attended the training provided by the Academic Development Unit in the Learning and Teaching Centre, and the course convener checked the marking of all new tutors. The extent of the GTAs engagement with the academic life of the Department was apparent in the fact that they undertook some Honours and even some Masters teaching and had been consulted in the design of the Levels 1 and 2 courses.

Peer assessment

4.3.6 Peer assessment, as a contribution to the assessment of a student's performance as a whole, is a topic which has been raised in other DPTLA reviews and most departments have regarded it as something to be approached with great caution if approached at all. The Review Panel was very interested in its application in RESH-2 where students were working intensively in groups of three or four with limited staff involvement. Each student assessed his/her own contribution to the work of the group, and that of every other member, using a 22 point scale. Each student's contribution was assessed separately against five criteria:

- Leadership and direction
- Enthusiasm
- Technical skills
- Research and writing skills
- Reliability

and an average score determined for each student. Although in terms of weight, this score contributed only 14% to the assessment of the course as a whole, the Panel felt that it enhanced the course, helping as it did to focus on how different individuals might contribute in different ways to group projects, and how useful skills might be learned or improved. How objectively students were able to discharge the assessment responsibility in the face of comradeship and group loyalty, the Panel did not really determine – certainly it heard of group members marking generously across the board – but this seemed hardly to detract from the usefulness of the innovation.

Formative assessment

4.3.7 The Review Panel concluded that engagement with peer assessment provided a good example of assessment supporting learning and, in the words of the SER, “enhancing the quality of the learning experience.” But it found other examples, notably the prompt return of coursework submitted for assessment, and the care that was taken to provide formative assessment in a structured, analytical way. (The Panel was impressed that the form used to return comments to students on their work had been designed in consultation with students.) GTAs described the care they took to get formative assessment back to undergraduates even when the students appeared concerned only to know their grades, and their students confirmed that tutors and lecturers were generous in their willingness to discuss difficulties that students might have with their work, or take time to explain when understanding fell short.

4.3.8 The Department drew attention in its SER to the speed and quality of its assessment feedback being a particular strength and that it was a matter of policy “that all pieces of written work will – in normal circumstances – be available for return to students within two weeks of submission.” As far as they went, National Student Survey results were supportive of this claim but, as the Department readily acknowledged, these figures combined the returns from Economic and Social History and from History. Nevertheless, the results for comments and feedback were significantly better than the

GU average, and better than those returned for almost all the other Russell Group universities. The Review Panel would have liked, but were unable, to disengage the Department's figures from the aggregate but, given the high standard it set itself, the student questionnaire returns tended to confirm that this was an area in which the Department was doing well. The undergraduate students whom the Panel met seemed content with the timescale within which work was returned, and very happy about the quality of the formative assessment they received. The GTAs themselves said that feedback to students on their essays was broken down according to several assessment criteria and was very detailed – making clear both where students had gone wrong and where they had done well. The Panel **commends** the Department for its excellent provision of feedback and formative assessment to its students at all levels.

Assessment at postgraduate level

4.3.9 The Review Panel had learned from the SER that, in accordance with the principles underlying SCQF Level 11, much less emphasis was placed on examinations at postgraduate level. The greater emphasis on continuous assessment encouraged deeper engagement with the material and allowed students more freedom in pursuing their particular interests. Examinations are, however, retained for some core courses, permitting students to demonstrate attainment of ILOs.

4.4 Curriculum Design, Development and Content

Enquiry-led teaching

4.4.1 The Department's SER had signalled to the Review Panel its awareness of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, and of enquiry-led learning as one of its key principles. The Panel was curious, therefore, to explore the Department's interpretation of the principle, and how it was being implemented. In the event, discussions with staff, GTAs and students demonstrated that less reliance was being placed on traditional teaching with its presentation to students of the answers they were expected to learn. The traditional approach was not being abandoned but was being augmented by one in which students were, instead, being asked questions – or encouraged to formulate questions - to which they should find answers for themselves. What was to be learned was not, however, the answers to these but the means by which the answers were discovered.

RESH-2 versus dissertation

4.4.2 While enquiry-led teaching appeared to be introduced at Levels 1 and 2 with the sources report and census interpretation assignment respectively, it was taken further forward in the Honours programme with the RESH courses. The Review Panel had noted that comparatively few students were including the dissertation option in their curriculum but were taking RESH-2 instead. It had learned that the Department had decided to provide this alternative because of “the difficulties faced by students in dedicating the summer vacation to the primary research required” to support an Honours dissertation. Undergraduates whom the Panel met confirmed their reluctance or inability to give up the summer before their final year to such research, but none complained that the demand might be unfair. The Panel was satisfied that this alternative met the requirement for Honours students to engage in an extended piece of independent research or project work. It was undertaken in the first semester of the Senior Honours year and required that very small groups of students worked together on a research project, at its conclusion making an oral presentation on their research and findings. The SER explained that this required students to work as a team, and that “a high level of professional presentation – both written and oral” - was expected of them.

4.4.3 One postgraduate student, but a former member of the Honours class, told the Review Panel how useful the RESH emphasis on technical background and on presentation, IT

and other transferable skills had proved to be. In this respect another student contrasted it favourably with what was provided in the Honours programme in History. In conclusion the Panel was concerned more about what might be missed by those students who opted for the dissertation than by those students who did not, and **recommends** that the Department should seek to ensure that students not taking RESH-2 have other opportunities to develop skills in working co-operatively and maintaining records of personal and group progress. It **commends** the Department for delivering courses that included such a high degree of generic training and for achieving so high a level of student awareness of the opportunities presented for learning transferable skills and an understanding of the wide range of contexts in which they might be applied.

Research-led teaching

4.4.4 The extent to which what was taught was itself the outcome of what the teachers had learned from their own research was also a matter that the Review Panel explored. It found very little evidence of tension between the competing demands of teaching and research on staff time but, rather, a happy acceptance that the two were complementary. A glance at the range of topics included in the Levels 1 and 2 programmes would indicate that there must be limits to the extent to which this was true, but Honours and postgraduate students confirmed the picture painted in the SER of taught courses being kept fresh by the currency of material included and the enthusiasm of staff engaged in pushing out its boundaries. The Panel **commends** the Department for its commitment to the principle of research-led teaching and the effectiveness with which it has translated the principle into the curriculum.

Range of Honours options

4.4.5 The Review Panel had read in the SER that “the honours curriculum is based on modular options designed to provide flexibility in student choice and to focus teaching in staff areas of research. The range of options available ensures that student choice does not result in a narrow curriculum, but which at the same time allows specialization in areas of particular interest.” The Panel was very impressed by the range of Honours courses supported by the Department – 12 (not including RESH-1 and RESH-2) in 2006-07, and in the current year 11 (of which 7 had not been offered in 2006-07). On its visit it discovered that staff were comfortable with the number of Honours options available to students and, when asked, focused on an upper, rather than lower, limit to class sizes, and suggested that there might have been some capping at 32 though this was clearly not a common occurrence. The Panel **commends** the Department for the range of topics it is willing and able to provide for study at Honours.

Progression within Honours

4.4.6 Dr Carnevali, the external member of the Review Panel, confirmed that the Department’s programmes were in close accord with the History Subject Benchmark but questioned how teaching Junior and Senior Honours students together was consistent with the requirement for progression between the two years. She indicated that at the University of Birmingham the two streams were quite separate and, while the dissertation might have served to distinguish the two groups more clearly, as already noted, few students chose to write a dissertation. The Head of Department was able to satisfy the Panel, however, that the students’ attendance in some classes did not inhibit progression but encouraged it. RESH-2, taken in Senior Honours, was very much more demanding than RESH-1, and Junior Honours students benefitted and learned from their more experienced classmates. The students themselves seemed to have no sense that the arrangement was either particularly good or bad but, when they were asked about the *pros* and *cons*, they cited only advantages. The Panel was told that no one felt inhibited about contributing, and the mixture of experience benefitted everyone; also, it was said, it was good to have new people join the familiar group. On this point, one member of staff said that Senior Honours students sometimes adopted a

mentoring role and, in general, the course was given a broader perspective. Meanwhile, it was reported by the Quality Enhancement Officer that there had been meetings to encourage more students to sign up for the dissertation, and that more were now showing interest.

Fairness and equality of opportunity

4.4.7 The Review Panel was satisfied that the Department was fully conscious of its responsibilities under the University's policies on equality and diversity to ensure that its teaching environment was free from discrimination and unfair treatment. The SER reported that this is monitored by the Teaching Review Group and the Quality Enhancement Officer and that "students are encouraged to raise any particular issues directly with the Head of Department and there are examples, appropriate to particular circumstances, of flexibility in terms of deadlines, class scheduling, locations and other matters."

4.5 Student Recruitment

PGT recruitment

4.5.1 Some of the documentation provided to the Review Panel aroused serious concerns about the numbers recruited to the Department's PGT programmes; these were so low that questions about the viability of some of the provision were inevitable. The Panel felt bound also to ask about recruitment methods and strategy which, on the one hand, appeared to have been ineffective in attracting numbers but also, given that completion rates seemed poorer than might have been expected, in attracting candidates who were suited to the programmes. The Head of Department told the Panel that he was aware that the numbers were low and needed to be increased. The masters degrees provided the normal entry route for PhD students (the figure of 16 out of 25 was quoted), and he pointed out that, considering the Department's size, the number of PhDs it produced was impressive. Some in the Department, however, thought the masters programmes perhaps too tightly focused on research training, and all had, therefore, recently been reviewed. As a result, proposals had been put to the Faculty Board of Studies with the object of making PGT programmes more flexible. Further, and supported by a Faculty initiative, more was being done on the marketing front: fee waivers and scholarships were being introduced with a view to increasing the profile of programmes as well as the numbers participating. The Head of Department also reminded the Panel that programme participation figures provided an incomplete picture of PGT provision as a number of students from other University programmes attended courses taught by the Department.

4.5.2 Placing the problem in wider context, the Quality Enhancement Officer assured the Review Panel that recruitment to economic and social history programmes was a problem nationally. The question was raised with the postgraduate students who met the Panel, and they seemed to agree that the discipline had a low and rather unattractive profile; even those who had come into it had often done so by accident. It was suggested that the fact that it was no longer taught at A-level might be relevant, but one student thought the name off-putting and believed the subject required stronger marketing. One of the postgraduate students whom the Panel met was the only student on his programme and, although he spoke of a certain sense of isolation, his appreciation of the contrast with seminars of 80 students in his native Germany was apparent. He did, however, share the research training course with other students and found the inter-disciplinary mix there to be helpful.

4.5.3 Staff, too, thought that recruitment could be increased if more effort was put into marketing programmes. One suggested that this might include getting advice on developing web pages. PGT marketing was seen as primarily a Faculty issue and the Department ought to co-ordinate its efforts more effectively with those of the Faculty.

While acknowledging that the Department itself recognised the problem and was actively seeking solutions, the Panel **recommends** that it continue to develop a strategy for PGT growth.

Undergraduate recruitment

4.5.4 On the subject of undergraduate recruitment, staff were asked by the Review Panel to consider the proposition of a Level 1 course in Economic and Social History being introduced as a compulsory element in the MA History programme. Staff thought that, with History being in the Faculty of Arts, this might be problematical but for most the idea was, if interesting in its novelty, essentially unattractive. Dr Rollings forecast a period of continued staffing stability and suggested that the Department had a few years in which to raise its profile for students. Few students, he said, applying for entry to LBSS, applied specifically for Economic and Social History.

4.5.5 Preferring carrot to stick, the Head of Department said that, in the context of changes being introduced to the History curriculum in Scottish schools, he was currently drafting a letter to all head teachers, introducing them to the opportunities for further study of the subject at this University. The SER reported that the Department had, in the past, used a range of recruitment devices including “writing to and visiting schools, participating in a Higher and 6th-year conference for school students, and hosting advanced seminars for teachers.” The Department saw the necessity now of attempting further initiatives and those being considered included “revisiting school contacts and speaking to both Economic History Society and Scottish Economic and Social History Society schools conferences, hosting an alumni event for graduates in the teaching profession, using Honours students as mentors for first year students and hosting a series of alumni career events making use of new networks and goodwill developed during the Departmental Jubilee.” The Review Panel again **recommends** that the Department continues to develop and implement a strategy for increasing recruitment.

4.6 Student Progression, Retention and Support

Progression and retention issues

4.6.1 The view of one postgraduate student, already reported, that students who found their way into the subject did so more often by accident than design was thought by the Review Panel to have some relevance in the areas of progression and retention. From its initial reading of the documentation the Panel identified the following questions to explore with the Department and its students:

- Were the numbers progressing to Honours not lower than might have been expected given the enrolment figures for Level 1 and Level 2 classes?
- Was the percentage of Junior Honours students who failed to progress to Senior Honours not higher than usual?
- Were there disadvantages in admitting to Honours some students who hadn't completed Levels 1 & 2 courses?

It was perhaps not surprising that students who intended taking a degree in History, Economics or Sociology, but who had to find another subject at Level 1 or Level 2, might opt for Economic and Social History. Given what the Panel had heard about the low level of initial student interest in that subject, however, it was perhaps not totally surprising that the temporary affiliation should not translate into something more permanent in the form of progression to Honours. The attention given to numerical data and quantitative methods might also be off-putting for some students anticipating a more text-based approach to study. As for progression from Junior to Senior Honours, with competition for places in the Honours class perhaps less intense than in some subjects, it would not be surprising if relatively more students who had experienced

some difficulty at Level 2 were admitted to Honours in Economic and Social History. Responding to a question about the loss of students between Junior and Senior Honours, the Head of Department said that some students were admitted to Honours on the understanding that they would progress to the second year only if their performance in the first justified it and they achieved a prescribed standard. Some of these students did not meet this prescription, and subsequently graduated with an ordinary degree. Dr Rollings said also that some students entered Junior Honours carrying a commitment to achieve Level 1 or Level 2 credits in another subject, and subsequently failed to complete the relevant course.

- 4.6.2 Asked whether there were disadvantages in permitting students to enter Honours without completing Economic and Social History at Levels 1 and 2, the Head of Department pointed out that all Honours entrants were required to have completed a significant amount of study of the subject at Levels 1 & 2 and that the work they had done in other subjects was usually complementary and served to enrich their own experience and that of other members of their Honours classes. He added that, in his experience, students coming to the subject from other backgrounds were sometimes more than usually committed after changing their minds about their first choice subject.

Staff support

- 4.6.3 The Review Panel had been strongly impressed by what it had read in the SER about the flexibility of the staff response to student needs, and their commitment to student support. The integrity of this was nicely indicated in the SER in the reference to the Department's support for the Faculty adviser system and the fact that this has had "considerable benefits to the Department in terms of understanding student difficulties and concerns". The Panel's attention was attracted also by the review classes being "offered prior to re-sit examinations for Levels 1 and 2, and for first-semester Honours modules prior to the Honours examination diet." The Panel noted that all students were "encouraged to approach their tutors prior to submission of essays and that tutors welcomed the opportunity to offer guidance on essay plans and early drafts." "Intensive support and supervision" was also provided "for those undertaking dissertations at undergraduate or postgraduate level." The Panel was impressed that letters were sent to Level 1 students who, without notice or apology, had missed even one seminar.
- 4.6.4 The Review Panel was concerned, however, that such initiatives must only be possible at significant cost in terms of staff time. Dr Rollings' response was that it simply reflected the Department's commitment to teaching and the staff's willingness to "go the extra mile" and sometimes much farther than he had any right to expect. He described himself as "very lucky to be in this Department." The undergraduate students were also appreciative of the staff efforts, and also recognised that they were not to be found everywhere – staff in this Department, they said, understood the real world unlike those elsewhere who preferred the isolation of an ivory tower. One undergraduate said that the Department was a good one which had "been there for me when I needed help." When the Review Panel suggested that such support was perhaps only possible because of comparatively small class sizes, this student said that, even if numbers went up, the staff would try to provide the same level of support. The SER alerted the Review Panel to the student Economic and Social History Society to which the Department offered considerable support, financially and in staff time. The Panel **commended** the Department for the effort it put into student support and, in particular, for the readiness of staff to make themselves available to students at all levels.

4.7 The Quality of Learning Opportunities

- 4.7.1 The Review Panel was satisfied that the range of teaching and learning methods used in the Department was appropriate to the aims and learning objectives already discussed.

As explained in the SER, while “the primary mode of teaching is the formal lecture; learning is primarily located in seminar discussions and the reading that students undertake in preparation for these.” The Panel was satisfied also that the quality of teaching provision was maintained and assured in what the SER described as “a culture of self reflection and enhancement.” Student questionnaire returns are discussed in Departmental meetings and inform ongoing course development discussions, while any issues that relate to teaching quality will be considered by the Head of Department and will be taken into account in staff review and consideration of training and development needs. The Department reported that, in future, the results of questionnaire returns will be published on its *Moodle* site.

- 4.7.2 The Review Panel was provided with summaries of student questionnaire returns and found these to be indicative of a generally high level of student satisfaction with the Department’s provision. Reference has already been made to the excellent NSS survey results achieved by the Department with the Department of History and the students, undergraduate and postgraduate, whom the Panel met confirmed their appreciation of the quality of the learning opportunities provided. The Panel received also External Examiner reports from 2005 onwards and again found these to be hugely supportive of the programmes the Department was delivering at all levels.

Moodle

- 4.7.3 The SER highlighted the fact that the Department’s provision for students included “extensive use ... of *Moodle*, not only for making course brochures and lecture notes available, but for providing additional links to external websites and other forms of supporting material.” Undergraduate students described *Moodle* as really useful both for communicating with classmates and for document distribution. In the meeting with the Review Panel, however, the Quality Enhancement Officer said that *Moodle*’s interactive facilities were not being used by students who preferred other methods of communicating among themselves, and one of the staff later reported that the students preferred *Facebook* for social networking. One of the Panel members suggested that devising an exercise which was to be tackled collectively by each seminar group and mounting this on *Moodle* might encourage more use of its discussion facilities. The Panel was particularly keen that *Moodle*’s potential might be exploited as fully as possible to reduce the burden of student support carried by staff. While the Panel recognised that the Department might already have attempted such things it suggested that it might be possible to use *Moodle* to facilitate mutual support among class members, and to address common problems with students collectively rather than individually.

Student participation

- 4.7.4 It was clear to the Review Panel that the Department actively sought student participation in discussion of the design and content of taught courses. Concerned about apparently low levels of sustained student interest in the Staff-Student Committee, the Department had decided to add student representation to the Teaching Review Group which set the teaching strategy for the Department. Students also played an active part in determining not just the social activities of the Economic and Social History Society’s programme but its academic content.

4.8 Resources for Learning and Teaching

Workload model

- 4.8.1 The workload model which had been provided to the Review Panel was discussed with the Head of Department and other members of staff. It had been adjusted for session 2006-07 in the light of experience and a realisation that the earlier version had placed too high a premium on Honours teaching; Dr Rollings reported that his colleagues thought it now more equitable. Individual workloads were reviewed annually but staff

tended to take a longer view of the distribution of work - the model generated average load values across a span of three years – and, consistent with the ethos of collegiality, did not demand the delivery of exactly balanced loads across short time scales. Research leave was allowed equitably, traditionally at the level of one term in nine, and administrative jobs were shared and linked to the rotation of the headship of the Department. The Panel **commended** the Department for its achievement in securing a fair and universally accepted means of sharing workload.

Administrative support

4.8.2 The Review Panel was aware from its reading of the SER that the Department had had to cope with a high level of sickness absence in the area of administrative support. Being a small Department there was little built-in cover for such contingencies and the Head of Department said that it had resulted in more of the burden of routine tasks being carried by academic colleagues. The SER had indicated that the Department had learned from the experience and reported that “administrative staff are now spending time writing detailed policies and procedures for the administrative operation of the Department, in an attempt to make the systems more robust and reliable, and less reliant on individuals’ tacit knowledge.” From this work a handbook of procedures was being compiled.

Inductions and other introductions

4.8.3 The GTAs recorded their appreciation of the assistance provided by the Learning and Teaching Centre. The probationer had no experience in that quarter to refer to as he was due to begin the New Lecturer and Teacher Programme the following day. He had, however, found the general induction very helpful and his only complaint was that he had had to start teaching without any knowledge of how to use the AV facilities.

Teaching and learning resources

4.8.4 The Review Panel noted the Department’s association with the Higher Education Academy Centre for History, Archaeology and Classics, and the recently successful application to the Learning and Teaching Development Fund is noted below in paragraph 6.3. It was clear that the Department had been attentive to the various quality enhancement themes and the SER had recorded that the recalibration of Honours modules had been “informed by the deliberations on assessment” and that the employability theme had been “significant in developing the new RESH honours modules.” The Panel noted too that Department staff had engaged with “University and Faculty working groups on employability, plagiarism, assessment and retention” and that discussion in these groups had informed the Department’s provision at all levels.

Teaching and study facilities

4.8.5 The Department’s satisfaction with its accommodation in Lilybank House was noted with pleasure by the Review Panel. The Panel was also pleased that the Department had been able to record the strength of IT support for teaching and learning and the outstanding collections in the University Library. When postgraduate students were asked about facilities they said that they were happy with the space available to them and with library and computing facilities. Interestingly, in view of Library developments in recent years, one said that there was a need for more study space where there wasn’t a computer occupying the desktop. Undergraduates were happy with the way the Library had responded to the need to put more material into the Short Loan Collection, and reported that online resources were good.

5. Maintaining the Standards of Awards

- 5.1 This report has already acknowledged the extent to which External Examiners have recorded their support for the standards adopted in the Department (paragraph 4.7.2 above). The Review Panel accepted the importance of external scrutiny in the assurance of academic standards, and noted with satisfaction that members of the Department had themselves been appointed as External Examiners at Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leicester, LSE, Manchester and St. Andrews. The ease with which the SER in several places described Departmental policy in the context of QAA benchmark statements, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the University's Code of Assessment provided the Panel with ample assurance of the Department's cognisance of the means by which the standard of awards is maintained. The recent case of a group of students failing to achieve the standard required of a masters degree evidenced not only the effort that staff were prepared to invest in student support (already discussed) but the pre-eminence of their commitment to academic standards.

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

- 6.1 Throughout the SER, and in the evidence it heard from members of staff, the Review Panel encountered only positive references to the quality assurance and enhancement agendas. The Panel was entirely satisfied as to the effectiveness of the procedures the Department had in place to monitor and enhance the quality of its students' learning experience. Although both the undergraduate and postgraduate students whom the Panel met were as passive on these topics as one might expect contented students to be, the staff seemed united in their willingness to embrace change that might improve the students' learning experience and equip them better for careers in a wide range of possible occupations.
- 6.2 Reference has already been made to the Teaching Review Group (paragraph 4.7.4 above) which was chaired by the Quality Enhancement Officer. In composition this consisted of the conveners of Levels 1, 2, 3 and Honours, as well as student representatives from each Level. It met at least once per semester and, according to the SER, "its role is to set the teaching strategy in the Department, and to ensure that all delivery is informed by the principles of reflection, enhancement and excellence." The Review Panel **commends** the Department for a committee structure which combines student representation with such a clear focus on enhancement of the student learning experience.
- 6.3 The Review Panel learned that in 2006-07 the Teaching Review Group had identified that Level 1 and Level 2 students performed better in internally-assessed work than they did in examinations. The concern was that they were not being adequately prepared for exams, and a bid was subsequently made to the Learning and Teaching Development Fund to support development of a programme of skills which will be embedded in the Level 2 curriculum from 2008-09.
- 6.4 The responsiveness of the Department to student comment was evidenced in the SER on several issues and the Review Panel was persuaded that the Department was justified in maintaining that it was "committed to continuous enhancement and able to respond in a thoughtful manner when difficulties arise or suggestions are made." Student feedback on the Level 2 computing exercise had suggested that this was too time-consuming, and the Department had tried in different ways to address this perceived problem without much effect. It has, therefore, taken the decision that, from session 2008-09, one of the exercises will be replaced by an oral history assignment. When, shortly after the introduction of RESH-1 some students raised concerns about variation in the demands made on, and the support provided to, different groups, means were quickly found to establish consistency.

- 6.5 The SER concluded its survey in this area by recording that Department meetings received and considered the draft annual monitoring reports at all levels and that this helped to “embed the quality enhancement agenda in the teaching programme, and ensures that all members of the Department take collective responsibility for the entire programme. ... The relatively small and highly collegiate nature of the Department ensures that all such matters are discussed in a critical, but supportive manner.”

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

Key Strengths

- Commitment of staff to the integrity of the discipline of economic and social history, and their coherence as a mutually supportive and thriving academic community.
- Activity of staff in a wide range of research fields, enriching the learning experience of students accordingly.
- Enthusiasm of staff for teaching at all levels, not only with a view to sharing knowledge and understanding in the subject, but with a focus on widening and deepening students’ skills to equip them better for success beyond their current programmes of study.
- Fast, analytical feedback on students’ written work coupled with a readiness to provide further support as requested in a friendly environment.
- Broad support for quality assurance and enhancement agendas translating into well grounded policies and procedures.
- Wide range of topics available for study at Honours.

Areas to be improved or enhanced

- Internationalisation reflected in student recruitment and ‘study abroad’.
- Recruitment to undergraduate and PGT programmes

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The Review Panel was very impressed by the performance of the Department across the range of its teaching provision, its imaginative and committed support for the quality and further enhancement of the student learning experience, and its support for, and clear articulation to students of, University policy on assessment. The Department is an active academic community but also a generously inclusive social one. It has developed a workload model which is widely regarded as fair but staff are not bound by it and have frequently demonstrated a readiness to do more than their prescribed share. There is an effective committee structure which has sought to include students at all levels of discussion of teaching and learning provision.

Recommendations

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department of Economic and Social History. It is important to note that the majority 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 continue to develop a strategy for increasing the numbers of suitable students recruited to its PGT programmes. [paragraph 4.5.3]

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

Recommendation 2:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department continue to develop a strategy for increasing undergraduate recruitment. [paragraph 4.5.5]

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

Recommendation 3:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department give further consideration to the contribution it might make to increasing overseas recruitment and helping home students overcome the obstacles that accounted for very limited take-up of opportunities for study abroad. [paragraph 3.2]

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

Recommendation 4:

The Review Panel recommends that the Department should seek to ensure that students who undertake an Honours dissertation and who do not, therefore, take the course Researching Economic and Social History 2 are afforded other opportunities to develop skills in working co-operatively and maintaining records of personal and group progress. [paragraph 4.4.3]

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

Prepared by: Janet Fleming, Senate Office

Last modified on: Thursday 15 May 2008