

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Education Committee - Monday 14 June 2004

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment -
Report of the Review of the Department of Urban Studies - Friday
27 February 2004**

Mr Jim Craig, Administrator, Senate Office

Review Panel

Professor Chris Morris	Vice-Principal (Staffing) and Territorial Vice-Principal (Arts-based) [Convener]
Professor John Doling	Institute of Applied Social Studies, University of Birmingham
Professor Chris Berry	Member from cognate Department (Department of Politics)
Dr Judy Wilkinson	Senate Assessor on University Court
Dr Sarah Mann	Teaching and Learning Service
Mr James Craig	Senate Office [Panel Secretary]

Introduction

1. The Department of Urban Studies was formed in 1996 out of the former Department of Social and Economic Research in order to accommodate the Centre for Housing Research and Urban Studies at the termination of its funding support from the Economic and Social Research Council. In 2003 the Department was enlarged by the inclusion of the core group of Social Policy teaching staff following the dissolution of the Department of Social Policy and Social Work. Social Policy received an 'Excellent' rating in the Teaching Quality Assessment held in 1997-98 and a rating of 4 in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, the Department of Urban Studies a rating of 5 in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise.
2. The Department provided an excellent Self-Evaluation Report (SER) and supporting documentation in accordance with the University's requirements for the Review of Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment.
3. The Review Panel met the Head of Department, Professor Ade Kearns, and his successor to be, Professor Robina Goodlad, on two occasions. In a separate session it met the Quality Assurance Officer, the Social Policy Programme Director, the Director of Teaching, and the Postgraduate Convener. The Panel also met a probationary member of staff, three Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), two full-time MPhil students, two part-time Housing Studies Diploma students, and a number of undergraduates ranging from Level 1 to Senior Honours.
4. The Panel considered the following range of provision offered by the Department:
 - a) MPhil / Diploma / Certificate in Housing Studies (accredited by the Chartered Institute of Housing)
 - b) MPhil Urban Policy and Practice
 - c) MPhil Social Science Research (a majority of the component courses)
 - d) MRes Urban Research

- e) Continuing Professional Development - in addition to MPhil Urban Policy and Practice, a number of bespoke courses are provided on topics such as local housing market analysis, housing strategy formation, and partnership working.
- f) MA (Hons) programme in Social Policy

This programme may be taken as Single Honours or as part of a Joint Honours programme. Contributing courses are:

Level 1 Social Policy
Level 2 Social Policy

A selection of eight (in the case of Single Honours) from 12 Honours options.

The Panel noted also that the Department contributed an Honours option in *Regional Economics* as part of the Economics Honours Degree programme.

5. *Departmental merger*

- 5.1 The outcome of the merger of the core group of Social Policy teaching staff into the Department was a theme of the Review Panel's enquiry with several of the groups that it met. It was aware that such restructuring was typical of developments elsewhere in the area of Social Policy, and that problems were most likely to occur when the merger involved units with different cultural backgrounds. Given this, the Panel wished to explore what tensions had occurred, what impact they had had on the provision of teaching programmes, and what remedies had been applied.
- 5.2 The Head of Department described the merger as having been, in the first instance, attractive to the staff of both units, and this was a view subsequently endorsed by colleagues from both backgrounds. Before the merger, Urban Studies staff had contributed to the teaching of the Social Policy programme and this experience had itself fostered a shared sense of purpose. At the same time, Social Policy staff were aware of possible alternatives to the Urban Studies merger, and this had contributed to a strongly positive disposition to the preferred outcome. On the other side, Urban Studies staff were aware that, in Social Policy, colleagues were pursuing complementary lines of teaching and research. Coupled with this, the merger allowed the burden of administrative work to be shared (though some administrative resources were lost), and brought previously dispersed teaching colleagues together under one roof.
- 5.3 The Social Policy undergraduates who met the Panel appeared totally unaffected by the merger. Their Programme Director suggested that it might have been a little disconcerting for students when the idea was first mooted but, when they discovered that the only change in effect was to provide a single point of contact for all degree business, their anxieties quickly dissolved. The Panel asked staff about the place and prospects of Social Policy research interests in the context of the overall Departmental research strategy. Again they were reassuring, reporting that the reorganisation of research groups had been a challenge but not an unfamiliar one for the Department which, for twenty years, had been characterised by multi-disciplinary and multi-themed research. At the time of the Panel's visit to the Department an internal review of its structure was almost complete and had already led to the emergence of a Social Justice research group.
- 5.4 The Head of Department was not complacent, however, and reported that he continued to be sensitive to the possibility of difficulties. The Panel was thoroughly reassured and concluded that the merger appeared to have been a very good thing, with challenges met and opportunities taken. It **commended** the staff for their positive attitude to it and their determination to achieve a successful outcome. The Panel **recommended** that the internal review of structures should be pursued to its conclusion

and that, considering references below¹ to staff shortages, this should strategically inform recruitment decisions.

6. *Repositioning the undergraduate programme*

- 6.1 The Review Panel noted with interest the Department's plans to restructure the undergraduate Social Policy programme, renaming it 'Public Policy'. The Head of Department confirmed that the change reflected positively on the merger and signalled a stronger input to undergraduate teaching from staff from the Urban and Regional Studies side. It also represented a repositioning of the programme with interfaces with Politics and Economics, opening up employment prospects in areas such as environmental and transport policy.
- 6.2 Professor Kearns explained that, after an introduction at Level 1 to several areas of social and economic activity in which public policy was formulated, the focus would shift at Level 2 to teaching analysis of policy. He explained also the importance of a thorough understanding of the concept of opportunity cost for students entering employment in the sphere of public service management.
- 6.3 The students with whom the Panel discussed the proposed change welcomed it, suggesting that the popular interpretation of 'social' endowed the current name with a narrower focus than was appropriate for many. Exploring the same issues with key staff, the Panel learned that the change in programme content was expected to be evolutionary with the introduction of a broader base compensating for the loss of Social Work input at Levels 1 and 2, and thereafter with the development of new Honours options. In a later meeting, the Head of Department stressed that the shape of the Public Policy curriculum was still under discussion, and that the main constraint on developing a new programme was a shortage of staff.

7. *Housing Studies Programme*

- 7.1 The SER referred to the upcoming revalidation of the Housing Studies Programme by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the fact, partly in response to changes introduced by 'our main Scottish competitors' that the programme was being redesigned with a two year syllabus. The Review Panel noted that the current students expressed some misgivings about the reduction of the programme from three years to two on the grounds that it would tend to devalue the award.

8. *Further developments*

- 8.1 Countering the Panel's suggestion that a larger contribution to undergraduate teaching might be made by those who were engaged largely in research, Professor Goodlad said that there were very few colleagues who had not taught on the undergraduate programme. She referred also to plans which were at a still earlier stage for an undergraduate programme with the theme of 'space and place'. Noting that Paisley and Strathclyde Universities had closed urban and regional planning courses, she suggested that there was now a market opportunity in west central Scotland for a programme which would be supported by the Department's strengths in social and economic research, and which would comfortably complement Public Policy. Such a programme, she said, would look for contributions from the Mackintosh School of Architecture, Law, Accountancy & Finance and Civil Engineering, and the Department of Geography had already expressed interest in the idea. She said that Urban Studies had been in discussion with several relevant bodies, and would shortly be approaching SHEFC to discover whether pump priming funds might be available.

¹ See below paragraph 15.5

Overall aims of the Department's provision

9. The overall aims of the Department's provision were clearly stated in the SER and were available to students in course handbooks. The Review Panel considered the Department's overall aims to be entirely appropriate.

Undergraduate and Taught-Postgraduate Provision

10. Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

- 10.1 The Review Panel noted that programme aims were set out for students in the relevant course handbooks. The Panel agreed that these were consistent with the Department's overall aims and were appropriate to the corresponding level of study. The aims of the undergraduate programme were in line with the Benchmark Statement on Social Policy and Administration, and those for the Housing Studies Programme with the requirements of the Chartered Institute of Housing.
- 10.2 The Review Panel noted that ILOs were set out in all of the course handbooks. It read with approval the section in the SER which addressed this subject and **commended** the Department for the emphasis it laid on placing ILOs at the focus of teaching and learning activities.

11. Assessment

Traditional and non-traditional assessment

- 11.1 The Review Panel's impression from its reading of the SER was that the Department relied heavily on essays and traditional examinations as modes of assessment. In the course of the day's discussions, therefore, it explored the extent to which non-traditional assessment methods were already used or might be used.
- 11.2 The Head of Department reported that although the Housing Studies Programme relied on traditional methods, Social Policy exhibited more varied forms of assessment. Asked about project-based inquiry work, Professor Kearns replied that the difficulty lay in determining how its assessment should be validated. Peer grading had been considered but was problematic. Undergraduates reported that they had asked that presentations be summatively assessed, but said that staff had rejected the proposal. They suggested some inconsistency in the Department's position since, while it maintained that oral presentation skills were important, this work was not summatively assessed and some courses did not require presentations from students at all.
- 11.3 When this matter was raised with members of teaching staff, the Review Panel was advised that, in the Criminal Justice course, students were required to make two presentations. These, it was said, required the students to invest some considerable effort, and although this generated a certain amount of complaint, staff felt that the work did help students prepare for essays and examinations, and encouraged the development of useful transferable skills. But staff echoed the concerns about incorporating such assessments in summative coursework grades. They said that they had been flexible about the degree of cooperation that they had allowed within groups of students, but considered that this might have serious implications for individual marks, and were aware that some students objected to their colleagues deriving an advantage from the work of others. The main problem remained how assessment scores could be validated without disproportionately increasing workload.
- 11.4 The Review Panel agreed with the views expressed by various members of the Department who recognised the importance of developing presentation skills. It agreed also with those students who suggested that the work should then be summatively assessed, even if weighted only lightly in terms of the final grade outcomes, and

recommended that the Department give further consideration to how this might be achieved.

Assessment of coursework

- 11.5 Some of the taught postgraduate students whom the Review Panel met were critical of the length of time it took to have essays marked and returned, and suggested that, since students were penalised for late submission, staff, if they were late with their assessments, should offer an explanation. The Housing Studies Programme students advised the Panel that the mid-March deadline for the submission of projects created problems for them because that date coincided with the busiest time in the public sector where they were employed. In addition to this, essays were due in January and February, and this meant that coursework was all being written within a compressed period. When the Panel suggested that work could be completed in advance of submission deadlines, the students replied that other issues, such as securing ethical approval, could delay commencement of a project. The Panel noted these concerns and **recommended** that students' work submitted for assessment should be returned within the agreed time frames and that, in exceptional circumstances when this was not possible, students should be provided with an explanation for the delay.

Formative assessment

- 11.6 The Review Panel noted from the SER that, at Levels 1 and 2 of Social Policy, the Department carried out diagnostic tests both to identify early warning signals of possible underperformance and to help students to do better. The Panel noted also that, in discussion, the students were unenthusiastic about this exercise, and that one had remarked that it could undermine a student's self-confidence.
- 11.7 The MPhil students discussed with the Review Panel their concern that none of their essays were simply formatively assessed but that, from the first, they counted towards the final assessment. The Panel **recommended** that, with regard also to the observations noted in Paragraph 11.6, in all courses, means be found to provide students with a reasonable amount of constructive comment on performance in essay writing prior to summative assessment.

Examinations and the Code of Assessment

- 11.8 Undergraduates reported that examinations were well constructed to test what had been learned in group study, and felt that the instruments of assessment articulated well with both course content and the published intended learning outcomes. They said that they liked the split diet of examinations because that arrangement allowed some spreading of the risk of performance being adversely affected by unforeseen circumstances. The students expressed satisfaction with the way the Code of Assessment had been applied to essays, and the Director of Teaching said that the students liked the Code, and that staff generally found it easy to use and would wish to see something similar applied also to postgraduate assessment. The Social Policy Programme Director said that, with the introduction of the Code of Assessment, staff felt more comfortable awarding scores at the upper end of the scale.
- 11.9 The Review Panel **commended** the Department for its positive approach to the Code of Assessment and for including the Schedule of Grades and intended learning outcomes in course handbooks. It suggested, however, that this should be identified as a University rather than Faculty standard.
- 11.10 The Review Panel noted the Department's concern, expressed in the SER, about the threat to the integrity of the examinations that was posed by the short timescale within which subsequent procedures were required to be completed. It noted also the

observation made by the Quality Assurance Officer to the Panel that semesterisation had exacerbated timetabling problems.

12. Curriculum Design and Content

- 12.1 The undergraduate students were enthusiastic about the variety of teaching methods employed in the Department, and referred to guest speakers, the Level 2 poster session, and the group presentations as examples of this. One of the GTAs said that the poster sessions complemented independent study and provided a better bridge to Honours than conventional teaching alone. One of the Housing Studies students was particularly appreciative of the time allowed for class discussion because, he said, much could be learned from the varied experience of others in the class, and one of the MPhil students described the lectures as 'great' and delighted in their 'fast and furious' pace.

International Social Policy

- 12.2 Although highly appreciative of the Department's teaching in general, Honours students complained about the *International Social Policy* course which was a mandatory element of the Honours syllabus. Taught only in alternate years so that it was attended by students in both the first and second years of Honours, it was described as 'unimaginative and dull'. Staff responded to this criticism by emphasising to the Review Panel that this course was a requirement of the Subject Benchmark Statement, and pointed out that it had a unifying role within the programme that other courses did not possess. They suggested that they had perhaps been remiss in not emphasising this combined rationale to students. The Director of Teaching pointed out that compulsory courses were often unpopular and that there were far fewer of them than there used to be. The Panel discussed with the Head of Department the position of *International Social Policy* in the syllabus, and the assumption that there should be an optimum place for it, on pedagogical grounds, either in the third year or the fourth. It **recommended** that the Department give further consideration to the timing of this course, and to give clearer definition to the rationale underpinning its mandatory status.

Disparate teaching groups

- 12.3 The Review Panel noted in the Department's SER that several teaching sessions were shared by quite disparate groups of students. The MPhil students with whom this matter was raised reacted very positively and described the differences among class colleagues - heterogeneous as to age, nationality and experience - as a bonus, and one that should be further developed with class lists and contact data to support computer-based discussion groups. Housing Studies Programme students also thought the mix of colleagues an advantage. One of them said that, although e-mail addresses had been asked for and provided, no discussion list has been set up.
- 12.4 In the Review Panel's discussion with key staff, the Postgraduate Convener conceded that course content was, to some extent, affected by the mix of students attending joint meetings of classes, and the Quality Assurance Officer acknowledged the tension inherent in providing courses with sufficient breadth of appeal to be economically viable and in which students might participate fully, deriving the rewarding learning experience they had anticipated. On the evidence of the feedback from students, the Panel **commended** the Department for the extent to which it appeared to have met these objectives.

Guest lecturers

- 12.5 The SER had drawn to the Review Panel's attention the Department's willingness to employ the services of guest lecturers. The pressure of workloads encouraged the

practice, but the topical immediacy of parts of the curriculum provided a convincing rationale. The students to whom the Panel spoke were entirely comfortable with the arrangement, and indicated that they would have no objection to seeing more external teachers. The Head of Department, for his part, supported the idea of getting more input on current topics from guest lecturers. The Panel recognised the advantages of such a strategy but noted that setting up and integrating such teaching sessions was, itself, highly demanding of staff time.

International exchange

- 12.6 The Review Panel noted the Head of Department's report that, although there was only a limited amount of international student exchange on the undergraduate programme, he hoped that this could be extended. He had indicated that staff numbers were again an issue and referred to a fixed-term contract colleague who, if she were retained, might develop an Honours option *Leadership in the Voluntary Sector* for which there could be an overseas placement.

13. *Student Recruitment, Support and Progression*

Recruitment

- 13.1 The Review Panel learned that the Department had provided teaching for the third year of the Social Sciences three-year degree this had been terminated with the recent changes to non-honours provision for Social Sciences students. Although the subject (i.e. Social Policy) did not clearly build on the secondary school curriculum (apart from Modern Studies), in this respect it was not unlike the other social sciences and it was not immediately apparent why it should not be a popular option. The issue of school leaver recruitment was raised with the Head of Department who described an on-going proactive policy of liaison with teachers of Modern Studies in selected target schools. Visits of prospective students to Level 1 classes were also arranged. Because of the system of Faculty entry, Professor Kearns explained that his task was to attract to Social Sciences increased numbers of students with an interest in Social Policy.
- 13.2 In discussion with teaching staff, reference was made to the development of the Department's web site as a recruitment engine. Staff acknowledged that such a development might help, but pointed out that, while Social Policy courses elsewhere had seen their numbers fall, enrolment on the Glasgow programme had increased. Staff saw the recent introduction of Single Honours, the increased amount of choice at Honours level, and the planned change to Public Policy, all tending to make the programme more attractive. On the other hand, they pointed out that some other courses - like Economics - promised better financial rewards for graduates. The Review Panel **commended** the Department for its initiatives to increase recruitment to the undergraduate programme, and **recommended** that it develop its web pages to support this work.

Retention

- 13.3 The Head of Department indicated that he had concerns also about the retention of students after Level 1 and Level 2, but this, like recruitment, had improved. Until two years before, students had been able to take Social Policy at Honours only as part of a joint programme, and this had had a depressing effect on both recruitment and retention. Professor Goodlad acknowledged both the significant gender imbalance among undergraduate students in the Department, and the fact that this had not been addressed as a recruitment issue. The proposed translation of 'Social Policy' to 'Public Policy', she said, had not been motivated by a desire to attract more male students although that might prove to be a consequence.

Progression

- 13.4 The Quality Assurance Officer reported that, because Social Policy was felt to be a vulnerable programme, the Department had been reluctant to place a high bar on progress, and had accepted students with lower qualifications for Honours than those that other Departments in the Faculty might have been prepared to accept. The quality of Faculty entry, however, meant that very few of those admitted gained only a Third Class degree.

Support

- 13.5 In general, the undergraduates spoke well of the degree of support provided by staff, and said that the handouts, including copies of *PowerPoint* screens and reading lists, were very good. They described staff as being helpful with personal feedback. Asked by the Review Panel about the support they got from advisers of studies, the undergraduates were less enthusiastic, principally because of advisers' lack of affinity with the subject - one student commenting unfavourably that her adviser was a member of the Mathematics Department. None of the students the Panel spoke to had had any experience of the Effective Learning Advisers, and there appeared to be a consensus that they would rather go for help, if they needed it, to their own teachers. The Student Information Desk they seemed not even to have heard of, and reported that the Department provided them with all the information they needed. They did concede, however, that the Department could do more to identify possible career paths. The Panel **recommended** that, with respect to the advisory system, the provision of pastoral support should be more sensitive to students' subjects of study.

Vertical integration

- 13.6 Some Honours students told the Review Panel that they had seen a press advertisement announcing research opportunities in the Department before they had heard anything internally, and that this had caused some dismay. Staff were quick to point out that, although the timing had been unfortunate, it was implausible to suggest that the Department would wish to do anything other than encourage recruitment from the ranks of its own Honours students.
- 13.7 MPhil students described the restrictions that were placed on their movements within the Bute Gardens building, and felt that this inhibited healthy contact with PhD students. The Director of Teaching related this to the administrative problem of having so many undergraduate students entering the building. The Review Panel **recommended**, however, that, considering the lack of contact between Honours students and the MPhils and the fact that they had learnt first in the public press about research opportunities, the Department should identify ways of strengthening its vertical integration.

Careers development

- 13.8 The Review Panel raised with the Head of Department the view of undergraduate students that some liaison with the Careers Service would be helpful as would extending invitations to former students to talk to Honours classes about their own experience of employment. Professor Kearns said that this proposal was consistent with the Department's planning for Public Policy which addressed delivery as well as the content of the curriculum. The Panel suggested that this was an initiative which might be supported by the Learning and Teaching Development Fund. It **recommended** further that a forward looking session with fourth year students might also include a presentation on the Careers Service and consideration of postgraduate study in the Department. The Panel also **recommended** that Departmental away-days should be used to focus on issues related to the delivery of teaching

14. *The Effectiveness of Provision: Learning and Teaching*

Integration of content

- 14.1 The topicality of the taught postgraduate curricula, discussed above in the context of the contributions made to teaching by guest lecturers, provided other threads of discussion for the Review Panel. After one of the Housing Programme students had referred to the new and relevant material which could emerge in the interval between classes and the corresponding examination, the Panel asked if there was not then a paradox in the students' concerns about the availability of texts in the Library. The response of the students was convincing - that they expected the Library to provide the background material against which current developments could be understood and evaluated. Asked how well they thought the teaching integrated what was new with what might be found in the textbooks, the postgraduates were ambivalent - they emphasised that classes were very interesting and the subject well taught, but suggested that they were left to do some of this work for themselves.

Academic community

- 14.2 One of the MPhil students felt strongly that there was a need for an online forum to support students individually and to create a more cohesive class membership. She described the MPhil programme as comprising three core classes each consisting of two days of lectures and a half day tutorial. In addition to the twelve days of core classes there were 14 days of electives, and these were ranged unevenly from October to June. This syllabus, she said, could result in spells of idleness and a sense of isolation. A colleague reported that there were also delays in getting reading lists, and that handbooks tended to appear very close to the start of the corresponding course.
- 14.3 Housing Studies Programme students who were following part-time courses described a rather different experience, and spoke of the considerable amount of group work which facilitated exchange of experience and a high degree of interaction.
- 14.4 Addressing the structure of the MPhil syllabus, the Postgraduate Convener said that the fact that students could select from a number of optional modules, and that these were taken also by part-time students, meant that it was difficult to devise a programme for individual students that didn't contain extended gaps between some classes. The Postgraduate Convener acknowledged, however, that the MPhil programme had been under caretaker management since June 2003 as a result of a period of maternity leave, and that difficulties had been created by the lack of a teaching administrator.
- 14.5 The Review Panel was concerned, however, that some teaching appeared overly compartmentalised and to be delivered according to a model designed for part-time students and fitting the requirements of contract research. The Panel **recommended** that the Department should develop a strategy for improving the postgraduate students' sense of membership of an academic community, and for ensuring that they were adequately informed as to how they might employ their time between class meetings. The Panel also **recommended** that all reasonable efforts be made to provide handbooks and reading lists for postgraduate students at an early date in their studies.

Departmental web pages

- 14.6 The Review Panel discussed with staff the use that was made of Departmental web pages for student support. The Director of Teaching reported that, from session 2004-2005 and following a thorough review of the Department's website, students would be able to access all course materials on the web site a week after they had been distributed in class in hard copy. He indicated that colleagues had given some thought to supporting discussion groups on the web, but that a decision had been taken to delay such an initiative pending evaluation of others' experience. The Departmental Quality

Assurance Officer said that colleagues were waiting for guidance on the University's preferred VLE; the Director of Teaching acknowledged, however, that progress could be made with standard software, and informed the Panel of the Department's intention to allocate half the time of a secretary to this initiative. The Panel **recommended** that the Department give further consideration to using its web pages to enhance the learning experience of students at all levels within the Department, and to consult colleagues in the Faculty who had already begun to make extensive use of the *Universal Campus* VLE.

15. *Effectiveness of Provision: Learning Resources and their Deployment*

Teaching and research

- 15.1 A topic of inquiry for the Review Panel that was closely related to the merger discussed in the Introduction was the possibility of a tension between the teaching and research demands made on the Department. Such tensions are normal but, in this case, the merger of Social Policy with Urban Studies had brought a significant responsibility for undergraduate teaching to what was primarily a research unit with an outstanding track record. The Head of Department stressed that the contrast between the two units should not be overstated - not only had the Social Policy staff their own research interests, but Urban Studies had, prior to the merger, jointly delivered the course for several years, including the period involving the previous TQA exercise. Furthermore, Urban Studies staff taught their own MPhil programmes as well as the Certificate and Diploma in Housing Studies courses.
- 15.2 Again the Head of Department, as well as those colleagues whom the Review Panel met separately, offered assurances that there was no cause for concern. All staff, the Panel learned, were research active, and each carried a share of teaching commitments. The Department was described as being fully committed in practice as well as theory to the University's objective of providing research-led teaching. Evidence from students strongly supported this claim but the Panel derived from the description of staff lecturing in short bursts 'before passing the baton on to someone else' the impression that research was their primary activity.
- 15.3 Students appeared conscious of the benefits that they derived from this arrangement. The undergraduates spoke warmly of the teaching staff and, for the most part, rated the lectures highly. Postgraduate students seemed very much aware that they were being taught by leaders in related fields of research, and expressed their appreciation that staff knew what they were talking about from first hand experience. But both groups of students, as already noted, also had their criticisms - referring to issues which could have arisen as a result of staff having insufficient time for marking undergraduate essays or for keeping in touch with MPhil students during long gaps between class meetings. And such an explanation would be entirely consistent with Professor Kearns' concern - discussed below - that the Department had, for a number of reasons, found itself critically short-handed.
- 15.4 As noted, the Head of Department had indicated that each member of staff had his or her own teaching commitments, and in this context the Review Panel discussed with Professor Kearns the distribution of teaching load among the staff. Professor Kearns assured the Panel that he was, however, sensitive to possible inequalities and had made a point of discussing teaching timetables with colleagues who had, typically, elected to teach their specialist subjects without regard for the amount of marking or student contact hours that might go with them.

Staff shortage

- 15.5 The Department's concerns about staff shortages have already been referred to and Professor Goodlad acknowledged that the Department did not unanimously support the social and economic planning proposition² due to concerns that its resources might become overstretched. Earlier in discussion she had said that lack of staff resources was inhibiting progress on the Social Justice front, and the Director of Teaching acknowledged that too few core staff were assigned to the MPhil programme. The Review Panel noted the Head of Department's suggestion that the problem lay, at least in part, in the attraction of colleagues in Urban Studies for other universities, and with the time it took this University to fill resulting vacancies. He referred to the loss of four colleagues in the recent past and indicated that his first priority was to strengthen support for the MPhil programme.

New staff

- 15.6 The Review Panel's discussion with the probationary member of staff provided evidence that there was no shortage of work to go round. Dr Atkinson reported that he had already assumed the role of Course Coordinator for the Honours option in *Research Methods* and had similar responsibilities in respect of the Housing Diploma and MPhil programmes. He had, he said, been responsible for the redesign of the course, putting together a new handbook, writing and delivering lectures, and setting and marking exam papers. Working with the Head of Department, he had also built the *Urban Theory* course from scratch. Additionally, for two hours a week, he was available for consultation by students. At the same time, Dr Atkinson told the Panel, his research load had not yet diminished.
- 15.7 Dr Atkinson spoke highly of the New Lecturer Programme in which he had participated fully. He revealed, however, that he had not been formally assigned a mentor, and that he had not established a set of personal targets for the year. The Review Panel **recommended** that a colleague in the Department should be appointed at the earliest opportunity to the role of mentor, and that he or she should, as well as being available to provide informal encouragement, support and advice, assist Dr Atkinson to establish a formal statement of personal objectives which might be formally agreed with the Head of Department.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

- 15.8 The Review Panel discussed with a small group of GTAs the contribution they made to the undergraduate provision, and found that they were very comfortable with the level of support with which they were provided. They described a regime in which they attended Social Policy tutors' meetings once a fortnight at which they were led and briefed by one of the lecturers. They also attended teaching group meetings and felt able to contribute their own ideas. Tutors on the Housing Studies Programme had each one group of 15 students and, as well as having the tutors' handbook, they met once a week to identify any difficulties and make sure that the tutorials were addressing the relevant points. The training provided by the Teaching and Learning Service was described as very helpful.

Teaching accommodation

- 15.9 One of the most discouraging pieces of evidence presented to the Review Panel concerned the standard of accommodation. The Department has a particular problem with long teaching sessions in the Housing Studies Programme and the Postgraduate Convener referred to inadequacies in heating and ventilation. He described the

² See above paragraph 8.1

accommodation in the Adam Smith Building as 'shabby and uncomfortable', and lamented, in view of the immediately forthcoming validation exercise, that this had been an issue for the Chartered Institute of Housing five years previously. The Review Panel **recommended** that this matter be brought to the attention of relevant authorities in the University.

- 15.10 Some of the students in their meeting with the Review Panel registered their complaint that some class accommodation was not good. It was noted that this was a perennial topic in the Staff-Student Liaison Committee but one that the Department had been powerless to remedy. The Panel recognised that, not least because of the importance of CPD teaching, the standard of accommodation was a matter which had to be addressed. The Convener expressed the expectation that, with more rooms coming into the general CPD pool, there was some immediate prospect of improvement. However, the Review Panel **recommended** that more formal consideration be given at University level to the overall provision of facilities for CPD teaching delivery.

Library provision

- 15.11 Asked by the Panel about the standard of Library provision, Housing Studies Programme students complained that there were insufficient copies of some books. One of the MPhil students said that she had thought about trying to set up a resource-sharing co-operative based on communal space in the Department because there did appear to be problems of insufficient planning and/or learning resources. Some of the material that appeared on the reading lists, she said, was not represented in the Library catalogues.
- 15.12 The undergraduates reported that the Library was 'seriously under-resourced' and regretted that books relating to social policy were dispersed throughout the collections. On the positive side, however, they said that lecturers were effective in getting books transferred to the Short Loan Collection ahead of essay submission dates, and that the recently increased size of the computer clusters was much appreciated. It was reported, however, that, perhaps as a consequence, there was too little space for private study using Short Loan books. The Department's own resource centre was warmly praised by the postgraduate students.
- 15.13 Responding to students' comments, the Head of Department said that some difficulties were unavoidable because some of the material to which students were referred could not be acquired by the Library. He regretted also that there was insufficient space in the building to give the MPhil students the accommodation they would like. The Review Panel **recommended** that the Library be commended for improving its computing facilities but that students' observations about the level of resource, and the availability of study space for Short Loan books, should be brought to the attention of the appropriate Subject Librarian.

Maintenance and Enhancement of Standards of Awards

16. The Review Panel was satisfied that the Department had in place effective means for maintaining the standard of awards. The SER indicated that assessment procedures were entirely consistent with the new Code, and that external examiners' reports, grade profiles and student feedback were monitored. Degree classifications were compared both within the Faculty and with other institutions. The Panel noted the concern of members of staff with regard to the exercise of discretion, at an inter-Departmental level, in Joint Examination Boards.
17. The Review Panel noted also that the Housing Studies Programme was periodically revalidated by the Chartered Institute of Housing

Maintenance and Assurance of Quality

18. The SER identified a wide range of mechanisms by which the Department sought to be assured of the quality of its teaching provision, and the Review Panel noted with approval the use made of annual course monitoring reports. In this context, the SER laid particular stress on the mechanisms used for gathering and employing feedback from students. It reported that all students were encouraged to approach individual course co-ordinators or tutors with any problems they might have in relation to a particular course. For the most part this was borne out by the students who felt at ease with the idea of raising, for example, the issue of the PhD advertisement³ with some members of staff although they took the opportunity to suggest that others were less ready to listen to students, and that this was a matter that the Department should address. The Panel discussed the student surveys and the Staff-Student Liaison Committee in several of its meetings.

19. *Survey of students*

19.1 The student surveys were discussed first in the context of recruitment and retention⁴ when the Quality Assurance Officer reported that the Department had tried to discover why students had chosen, or not chosen, to do Honours, and that the information from this exercise was being applied at Level 1. The SER, indeed, described a thorough and ongoing collection of data which was structured to support comparison over time and across different courses. The Quality Assurance Officer confirmed that students were asked a wide range of questions including a number touching on career interests and the content of lectures. He described the response rate as being in excess of 50 percent but acknowledged that this might be too low. The Review Panel **commended** the Department for the systematic use to which it put the information it gathered, but **recommended** that questionnaires should be returned in class in sealed envelopes to permit valid and reliable conclusions to be derived from their contents.

20. *Staff-Student Liaison Committee*

20.1 The Housing Studies Programme students reported that accommodation issues comprised the main topic brought by students to the Staff-Student Liaison Committee and that, because these were beyond the Department's control, its meetings were something of a waste of time. They also noted that they were poorly attended. Asked whether, if an action were agreed, it was possible to monitor progress, one of the students said that the students were themselves remiss in not following up matters referred to in the minutes. The same student commented, however, that there were very few matters about which he or his colleagues felt sufficiently strongly to justify the effort. The undergraduates reported that they did not feel restricted as to what they could or could not take to the Committee, but said that the problem was that it was not a decision making body. Something of a *cause célèbre* emerged in the shape of a request, brought by students to the Committee, to put back the submission dates for some essays. The Review Panel was told that staff on the Committee had taken the matter away for consideration, and that a negative outcome had later been reported to the students by e-mail. What appeared to concern them more than the result was the terms in which it had been conveyed, and the fact that the arguments presented by the students appeared not to have been addressed.

20.2 Departmental staff responded to this example by expressing disappointment that the compelling reasons for rejecting the students' proposal had not been conveyed clearly. The Director of Teaching emphasised, however, that the rejection had not been a typical response by staff who had, in the past, often accepted students' suggestions; the

³ See above paragraph 13.6

⁴ See above paragraph 13.3

maximum size of Honours classes was cited as an example. The Review Panel **recommended** that the Department should establish separate constituency committees which should send delegates to the main Staff-Student Liaison Committee. It **recommended** also that the Department should consider the reasons for the students' diminishing interest in the Committee, and how these might be addressed.

Enhancing the Student Learning Experience

21. Several of the topics already discussed witness the Department's commitment to quality enhancement, and not least among these are the translation of the Social Policy degree programme and the impact on teaching of current research. The SER concedes, however, that the Department has, as yet, made little use of the Teaching and Learning Service (TLS) or of the relevant Learning and Teaching Support Networks. This report has referred to an issue on which the Department might seek support from the Learning and Teaching Development Fund⁵ but, that notwithstanding, the Review Panel **recommended** that it take advice from TLS on strategies for further enhancing students' learning experience.

Summary of Key Strengths and Areas to be Improved or Enhanced in relation to Learning and Teaching

Key Strengths

- The staff demonstrated a positive approach to the review and to the several challenges it identified; they appeared to be mutually supportive and to take pride in being members of a vibrant and successful Department.
- The successful merger of what had recently been two discrete administrative units, and which reflected well on all concerned, had produced a stronger Department and one which was already organising its resources to expand and develop its degree programmes.
- The staff were, on the whole, reported by students at all levels to be approachable, encouraging and supportive.
- The Department has a long and outstanding research record, and students are conscious of its teaching being fresh and informed by current developments.

Areas to be Improved or Enhanced

- The management of the Department's MPhil programme has been affected by staff absence and requires further attention.
- Students at all taught levels appeared segregated from those one level above, and all thought they could benefit from some integration.
- Students indicated that staff were sometimes slow to return coursework.
- Web pages could be developed both as an aid to student recruitment and to encourage formal and informal communications among students, particularly those engaged in the postgraduate programmes.

⁵ Former students talking about their experience in employment - see above paragraph 13.8

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The Department of Urban Studies is a strong academic unit which impressed the Review Panel by its positive approach to this exercise, the effort it put into the writing of its Self-Evaluation Report, and the quality of the documentation it presented.

Despite staff losses and continuing frustrations about the quality of teaching accommodation available to it, the Department continued to exude energy and ambition, building on its highly successful merger to develop stronger and more attractive degree programmes.

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department; in several instances these refer to initiatives which the Department itself has already identified. The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are ranked in order of priority.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The Panel recommended that the Department should develop a strategy for improving postgraduate students' sense of membership of an academic community, and for ensuring that they were adequately informed as to how they might use the time between class meetings. (*Paragraph 14.5*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 2:

The Panel recommended that the Department should give further consideration to using its web pages to enhance the learning experience of students, encouraging formal and informal communications, particularly among students engaged in the postgraduate programmes, and that staff should consult colleagues in the Faculty who had already begun to make extensive use of the *Universal Campus VLE*. (*Paragraph 14.6*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 3:

The Panel recommended that a colleague in the Department should be appointed at the earliest opportunity to the role of mentor for the probationary member of staff. (*Paragraph 15.7*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 4:

The Panel recommended that the Department should identify ways of strengthening the vertical integration of its courses and programmes. (*Paragraph 13.7*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 5:

The Panel recommended that Departmental away-days should be used to focus on issues related to the delivery of teaching. (*Paragraph 13.8*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 6:

The Panel recommended that the second Honours year should include a class meeting at which information might be made available on the subject of postgraduate study in the Department, and presentations made by the Careers Service and invited former students. (*Paragraph 13.8*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 7:

The Panel recommended that the Department should make every reasonable effort to provide handbooks and reading lists for postgraduate students at an early date in their studies. (*Paragraph 14.5*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 8:

The Panel recommended that, in all courses, means be found to provide students with a reasonable amount of constructive comment on performance in essay writing prior to summative assessment. (*Paragraph 11.7*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 9:

The Panel recommended that students' work submitted for assessment should be returned within agreed time frames and that otherwise students should be provided with an explanation for delay. (*Paragraph 11.5*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 10:

The Panel recommended that the Department take advice from TLS on strategies for further enhancing students' learning experience. (*Paragraph 21*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department and the Director of TLS

Recommendation 11:

The Panel recommended that the Department give further consideration to the timing of the International Social Policy course, and to provide Honours students with a clear statement of the rationale underpinning its mandatory status.. (*Paragraph 12.2*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 12:

The Panel recommended that student survey questionnaires should be returned in class in sealed envelopes to permit valid and reliable conclusions to be derived from their analysis. (*Paragraph 19.1*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 13:

The Panel recommended that the Department give further consideration to making summative assessment of students' oral presentations in class. (*Paragraph 11.4*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 14:

The Panel recommended that the Department develop its web pages as a means of encouraging recruitment. (*Paragraph 13.2*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 15:

The Panel recommended that the Department should establish separate student course committees which should send delegates to the main Staff-Student Liaison Committee. (*Paragraph 20.2*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 16:

The Panel recommended that the Department should consider the reasons for the students' diminishing interest in the Staff-Student Liaison Committee, and how these might be addressed. (*Paragraph 20.2*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 17:

The Panel recommended that the Department's internal review of structures should be pursued to its conclusion. (*Paragraph 5.4*)

For the Attention of: The Head of Department

Recommendation 18:

The Panel recommended that, with respect to the advisory system, the provision of pastoral support should be more sensitive to students' subjects of study. (*Paragraph 13.5*)

For the Attention of: The Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences

Recommendation 19:

The Panel recommended that the Library be commended for improving its computing facilities but that the students' observations about the level of resource, and the availability of study space for Short Loan books should be brought to the attention of the appropriate Subject Librarian. (*Paragraph 15.13*)

For the Attention of: The Subject Librarian for Urban Studies

Recommendation 20:

The Panel recommended that accommodation be brought to the attention of relevant authorities in the University (*Paragraph 15.9*)

For the Attention of: Director of Estates & Buildings

Vice-Principal (Estates)

Recommendation 21:

The Panel **recommended** that more formal consideration be given at University level to the overall provision of facilities for CPD teaching delivery (*Paragraph 15.10*).

For the Attention of: Director of Estates & Buildings

Vice-Principal (Estates)

University CPD Officer

Prepared by: Janet Anderton, Senate Office

Last modified on: Friday, 30 July 2004