



Periodic Subject Review (PSR)

Review of Geographical and Earth Sciences held on 16 and 17 February 2015

Report Summary

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

The full report of the review is available publicly at:

http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_419595_en.pdf

Further information about the PSR process can be found at:

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/senateoffice/gea/periodicsubjectreview/>

Italicised words are explained in a glossary below.

Key Strengths (Commendations)¹

1. Enhancing the Student Experience

- The high levels of student support provided and the culture of support that exists across the School at all levels.
- The levels of student engagement within the School, both from the point of view of their engagement with the process of learning through relevant and challenging experiences, and their engagement in the design, creation and support of their own and others learning. It was clear that the student experience and student engagement was a priority for the School.

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

- The high quality SER and the levels of engagement of both staff and students from across the School in the development of the report and the wider process of the PSR.

2. Enhancement in Learning and Teaching

- The strong and productive relationships between students and staff within a cohesive 'learning community', which undoubtedly underpins the enhancement of learning and teaching.
- The excellent work done at all levels to deliver interesting and relevant programmes, supported by the continuing enhancement of learning and teaching.
- The innovative development and use of 'Rock Around the University'² to engage and develop students' knowledge and skills and to enhance the teaching resources available to the School.
- The support and guidance provided to *GTAs* in Geography, within GES.

Areas to be improved or enhanced

The Panel recognised the generally excellent experience of students within the School and the good practice and commitment of staff. However, in order to further enhance provision within the School and in order to increase efficiency, the Panel made the following related recommendations:

1. Enhancing the Student Experience

- The use of industry specific software and technologies was important to students, and some suggested that the use of this software more extensively and consistently throughout the programmes offered within the School may enhance *employability*. The Panel recommends that the School consider an 'ideal state' in regard to the physical and I.T resources that might be made available to students in light of the forthcoming campus redevelopment and investments and develop this into a plan that could potentially be used to present information and guide decisions in this area. This might be linked to a broader plan highlighted as part of other recommendations. The Panel also suggests that the School keep under review the type of industry software which might enhance student employability and wherever practicable ensure that this is utilised as fully as possible in the programmes and courses on offer.

2. Enhancement in Learning and Teaching

- Undertake a systematic curriculum mapping and review exercise to address a number of recommendations below which suggest approaches to increasing efficiency and further enhancing the excellent learning and teaching practice within the School. The Panel makes this recommendation in acknowledgement of the pressures explicated by the School in terms of staffing and physical resources. Further recommendations and suggestions cross-reference and should be considered as expanding on this recommendation.

² LTDF Report available: http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_293568_en.pdf

- Undertake a mapping of programme and course level ILOs to their associated schemes of assessment, ensuring that ILOs are appropriately and sufficiently assessed but that there is not an unnecessary burden placed on students, or indeed staff. This exercise should ensure that a holistic view is taken of the number and type of assessments across courses, subjects and disciplines, appropriately linked to the aims and ILOs of the relevant programmes. *The Leading Enhancements in Assessment and Feedback (LEAF)* project would be a natural vehicle for these actions. Should an extension to the project be secured then the School might consider participating, and in any case may benefit from exploring the *Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB)* methodology utilised as part of the LEAF project. Where necessary, assessment should be rationalised or modified and aligned to an agreed School and programme level plan for assessment.
- Review its provision of feedback to students and explore the introduction of timetabled feedback sessions, as outlined in its action plan. The School should ensure that there is consistency in the format and detail of feedback where possible and should continue to use 'feedback monitoring forms' as it does currently. The School may find the use of Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB) methodology helpful when considering the use of feedback.
- Consider how, whilst continuing to support strong independent scholarship and practice, it might be possible to find further common ground in the development and delivery of shared or generic curriculum content. For example, where there is overlap in ILOs linked to the development of transferable skills, or other generic curriculum content, across programmes this should be highlighted to ensure that curriculum design and development takes this into account. This might lead to the delivery of additional common courses/teaching across programmes in Earth Sciences and Geography. This should be considered as part of the review recommended at **Error! Reference source not found.**
- In consultation with the College of Science and Engineering, the School should consider its needs for the development of adequate facilities over the medium and longer term and develop a plan based on an 'ideal state' in this respect. Whilst it was beyond the remit of the Panel to recommend that further resources be allocated or facilities be provided, it was of the view that a documented and coherent plan, linked to the growth in student numbers and current plans for future growth, would support the School in articulating its needs effectively in the context of future campus investments.
- To further develop a strategic approach, the Panel recommends that the School consider how it might disseminate examples of good practice in learning and teaching across the School in order that a strategic and, where appropriate, systematic approach to enhancement can be secured. Whilst the Panel acknowledged the need to maintain distinct disciplines within the School, and that learning and teaching approaches would be necessarily different depending on both the students and the courses and programmes being delivered, it was of the view that some practices could be more effectively shared and embedded across the School, perhaps in some cases leading to greater efficiency.
- In order to reduce the administrative workload on academic staff, the Panel recommends that the School consider how existing administrative staff might be supported to take a further proportion of the administrative workload. In the first instance, this might be facilitated through a review of convening roles, asking incumbents to identify the range of administrative tasks that are being undertaken by

academic staff. In the longer term, the School should liaise with the College of Science and Engineering on the possible appointment of a Teaching Administrator.

3. Context and Strategy

- Revisit what options are available to secure *accreditation* for the Earth Sciences programme. If the School remains of the view that accreditation is inappropriate, it should set out a clear and considered rationale which is available to students and anybody else with an interest. Whilst the Panel recognises and acknowledges the School's concerns both about the impact of additional field day requirements on students, and the Schools views on the relevance and efficacy of field days as a measure of student skills development, it is very important to be absolutely clear about the reasons for not pursuing the relevant professional recognition of the programme. The School is also encouraged to work in partnership with other institutions to make its concerns known to the Geological Society of London in a coordinated and concerted way.
- *Academic Standards Committee* to consider whether the School should reinstate the use of the full range of secondary bands within all primary grades for each piece of assessment which is marked within the School. This issue was considered by the previous *DPTLA* review in 2008 and, at that time, in consultation with the Convenor of the Code of Assessment working Group a view was taken that the application of the *Code of Assessment* was appropriate. The Panel is of the view that this issue should be reconsidered by Academic Standards Committee, given the time that has passed and potential changes in practice since the time of the last review. This was last considered by the Academic Standards Committee in May 2009.
- The College of Science and Engineering, and where appropriate other colleges, consider how changes to regulations across colleges, capping of student numbers on some courses (not in GES), and the resulting movement of students is impacting on GES and other Schools or Subjects. Further, there should be consideration by the College of Science and Engineering of what could or should be done to alleviate any particular pressures. Academic Standard Committee may wish to consider any response from the College(s) and decide whether any further action is required. The levers available to Schools to mitigate against such adverse impacts were limited within the current flexible structures. This made operational management of the associated issues extremely challenging. For example, coping with large fluctuations in student numbers from year to year, and the impact of high numbers on accommodation, the organisation, staffing, and timetabling of sustainable laboratory and field courses, the supervision of undergraduate research projects and related use of specialist equipment, and on the overall workload of teaching staff presented the School with particular difficulties.
- Seek guidance from College Human Resources on the development and promotion of University Teachers to ensure that School practice is in line with University policy and that its University Teachers are provided with the best advice possible on advancing their careers. They may also wish to consult Human Resources on the existing roles and responsibilities of University Teachers employed in the different disciplines within the School.
- Audit its workload model with a view to ensuring that it is as effective, simple and transparent as possible.

Glossary of terms/acronyms used

Academic Standards Committee (ASC)

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

Accreditation

Accreditation is a 'seal of approval' given to a programme by a professional body, association or other organisation. It has potential benefits for students, such as a recognised fast-track route for graduates seeking professional status or exemption from certain professional examinations

Code of Assessment

The University's Code of Assessment (implemented 2002-03) is designed to provide a fair and rational means of assessing students' performance. It provides instructions to staff on how assessment should be designed and carried out. It sets out verbal descriptions of each of the eight grades from A to H. Students' work is judged against these descriptions in terms of how well they have met the stated intended learning outcomes of the course or other assessed component and the corresponding grade is awarded. A guide to the Code of Assessment for students is available from the Senate Office website.

Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB)

Curriculum mapping and assessment blueprinting (CMAB) is a process which aims to ensure programmes fulfil a range of requirements in terms of aims and outcomes, whilst reducing teaching and assessment overloads (for both staff and for students), making teaching and assessment more effective overall. The mapping aspect examines what each course is doing in terms of the aims and outcomes of the full programme and in relation to other courses. The focus is on Intended Learning Outcomes and Graduate Attributes. Assessment blueprinting is the related process of looking at the assessment in each course, again in terms of the whole programme and assessment in other courses. The curriculum map informs the assessment blueprint through alignment of objectives to assessments. This is done as a collaborative, staff-led project.

Review of Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (DPLA)

Following the restructuring of the University in Session 2009-10 and the translation of departments and faculties to Schools and Colleges, the University's institution-led Internal Subject Review process, DPTLA, was re-named Periodic Subject Review (PSR). The review process remains largely the same but takes a subject-based approach, combining closely related subjects where it is feasible and in line with the new School and College structure.

Employability

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

Graduate Teaching Assistant or GTAs

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

Intended Learning Outcomes or ILOs

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

LEAF project

“Leading Enhancement in Assessment and Feedback” (LEAF) project which examines collaborative approaches to enhancing efficiency in assessment and feedback to students. This project had been initiated by Universitas 21 and runs across a number of subjects and institutions, including Edinburgh, Nottingham and Birmingham.

Periodic Subject Review or PSR

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