UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee – Summer Powers

Periodic Subject Review: Review of Sociology held on

17 February 2020

Lesley Fielding, Clerk to the Review Panel

Review Panel:

Professor Jill Morrison	Vice Principal and Clerk of Senate, Panel Convener
Professor John Solomos	University of Warwick, External Subject Specialist
Associate Professor Nicola Carr	University of Nottingham, External Subject Specialist
Professor Carl Goodyear	Senate Assessor on Court
Ms Morgan Daniel	Student member
Professor Andy Cumbers	Adam Smith Business School, Cognate member
Dr Nathalie Sheridan	Learning Enhancement and Academic Develop Service
Mrs Lesley Fielding	Senate Office and Clerk to the Panel

1.   Introduction

1.1   The Subject of Sociology ("the Subject") is one of five subjects that make up the School of Social and Political Sciences ("the School"). The School of Social & Political Sciences is one of five Schools in the College of Social Sciences.

1.2   The Subject last underwent full internal review in May 2014. The outcome of the review was positive in terms of student engagement, staff commitment and quality of provision. The Panel noted that the Subject was one of the leading providers of sociology education in Scotland and the UK.

1.3   Preparation of the Sociology Self Evaluation Report (SER) was undertaken by a number of teaching and administrative staff under the editorial leadership of Dr Matt Dawson, Head of Subject, with assistance from Dr Dickon Copsey, Employability Officer for the College of Social Sciences and Mrs Shirley Sayer, Careers Manager. The SER was circulated to the Subject staff and students for comments.

1.4　The Review Panel considered that the SER was self-aware and should be commended on the level of self-critical appraisal of the challenges faced by the Subject.

1.5　The Review Panel met with Dr Matt Dawson (Head of Subject), Professor Anne Kerr (Head of School), Professor John Finlay (Acting Dean of Learning & Teaching), 13 members of staff, 18 early career staff, 3 Graduate Teaching Assistants, 2 postgraduate and 5 undergraduate students presenting all levels of provision.

2.　Context and Strategy

2.1　The Subject's range of postgraduate taught provision had increased substantially from 8 Masters programme at the time of the last review to 13 programmes for session 2019.

2.2　Staff

The Subject's academic staff, are as follows:

Professor	11
Reader	1
Senior Lecturer	8
Lecturer	15
Tutors[1]	5

2.2　Students

Student numbers for the subject are summarised as follows:

Individuals enrolled on one or more courses at each level		Form of Study	
		class enrolment	visiting/erasmus/ exchange
Level 1A	482		
Level 1B	430		
Level 2A	182		
Level 2B	182		
Level 4 (Junior & Senior Hons)	181		

2.3　Range of Provision under Review

The following degrees are offered by the Subject Area

Undergraduate:

- MA (Soc Sci) Single Honours in Sociology
- MA (Soc Sci) Joint Honours in Sociology (with Social Science subjects)
- MA Joint Honours in Sociology (with Arts subjects)
- MA (Soc Sci) Sociology with Quantitative Methods
- MA (Soc Sci) Social Science (Three year 'Ordinary' Degree)

Postgraduate[2]:

- MSc Sociology
- MRes Sociology and Research Methods
- MSc Equality and Human Rights
- MRes Equality and Human Rights
- MSc Media, Communications and International Journalism
- MSc Global Migrations and Social Justice
- MRes Global Migrations and Social Justice
- MRes Criminology
- MSc Criminology and Criminal Justice
- MSc Transnational Crime, Justice and Security
- MSc Global Health (with an MRes in September 2020)
- PGCert Art Trafficking and Art Crime
- MSc Digital Societies (to open in September 2021)

2.4   Strategic Approach to Enhancing Learning and Teaching

2.4.1   The SER noted the Subject's recent landmark achievement of 50 years as a department/subject area, highlighting the key areas of the Subject's research and teaching success: Disability; Media; Cultural Sociology, Racism; Social Theory; Gender and Sexuality and Youth. The SER reflected the Subject's very strong, clear and consistent vision, which underpinned teaching of the subject with a strong belief that "sociology is something we do" and encouraged students to broaden their knowledge and develop tools for critical thinking and research led teaching. It was notable that the Subject successfully combined the three main disciplines from which the Sociology provision was drawn: Sociology, Criminology and Anthropology. The Panel noted that these subjects all interacted well together and were enjoyed by the students. Further to

the changes at Level 2, the Subject had received excellent feedback, and, at Open Days, potential students enquire specifically about the anthropological offering. The Level 1 and two students who met with the panel substantiated this view. The Review Panel **commends** the Subject for its commitment to providing a research-led, wide range of provision together with a high level of support to students.

2.4.2   The Review Panel explored the Subject's involvement with strategic vision and future plans, having noted from the SER that "resulting modes of delivery and conditions of teaching, has largely been decided outwith the Subject." (SER, p6)   The Panel, from discussions with the Head of Subject, was concerned that decisions related to strategic developments, including key processes such as new appointments, course development and approval, were implemented with no input or consultation with the Subject. Exclusion of the Subject's considerable staff expertise from such consultations was unfortunate and presented the Subject with substantial challenges. One effect has been the misalignment between the expertise of new staff and the Subject's portfolio, resulting in a disconnect in the Subject's planning and assignment of roles.

2.4.3   Similarly, with regard to postgraduate provision, the SER described, "the second major change has been the expansion in our teaching programme. This has been most notable at PGT level…" (SER, p5). The number of postgraduate programmes has increased from eight in 2013-14 to thirteen in the current session. The Review Panel was concerned that the strategy surrounding student growth at postgraduate level had been determined at School and College level; again, as stated above, exclusion of the Subject has resulted in a sense of disempowerment among staff.   The issue of postgraduate provision will be discussed in detail later in the report including associated issues of staffing and student satisfaction**.** While the Panel noted that there had been some recent positive developments in this regard, it considered that the previous omission of the Subject from key strategic planning and decision-making had disempowered the Subject.   The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject has representation on the relevant School and College Committees (including appointment panels) and is consulted on all key strategic planning and processes concerning the Subject. (5.1.3).

3   Enhancing the Student Experience

3.1   Admissions, Retention and Success

Admissions

3.1.1   As evidenced in the previous PSR of Sociology in 2013-14 and the current SER, the Subject has sustained a considerable increase in student numbers. The Head of Subject advised the Review Panel that, while the situation had been extremely challenging, new staff appointments and a review of Honours provision had stabilised the situation in relation to undergraduate numbers. The Panel noted that capping of numbers had not been permitted, apart from Level 1, which was capped due to the lack of appropriate teaching spaces.   The Head of Subject and staff agreed that, while undergraduate numbers had been consistently high for some years, the Subject had implemented changes and strategies to deal with the rise in student numbers and there

was no need for capping, at current undergraduate levels, at this stage. However, the Panel noted that undergraduate students found large class sizes problematic and the Honours students observed that class sizes of 30 reduced presentations to question and answer sessions rather than encouraging meaningful discussion. The Review Panel would suggest that the Subject continue to monitor closely undergraduate student feedback on this issue.

3.1.2   As mentioned above, the Subject had seen a substantial increase in postgraduate provision (2.4.3) and a subsequent rise in postgraduate student numbers since the previous PSR. Additionally, the SER referred to postgraduate student reps having expressed "very strongly", the impact that the increase in student numbers and class size had on the nature of what a Masters education involved. The Panel noted that classes ranged from 4 to 30 students which presented substantial difficulties, particularly as the students all undertook the same core course. From the SER and discussions with the Head of Subject and staff, the Review Panel noted that two programmes gave rise to concern: the MSc Media Communications and International Journalism and MSc Global Health. Three members of staff ran MSc Media Communications and student numbers had increased from 21 students in session 2018 to 41 students in session 2019. Likewise, the MSc Global Health was supported by a Professor and one early career member of staff and currently had 30 students, having risen from 24, with the potential to rise to 60. To accommodate the increased postgraduate numbers the Subject had increased the number of tutorial groups; however, this was further complicated by the School's insistence that the core courses should be available to students outwith the Subject. The Review Panel considered that, in view of the continuing rise in student numbers, possibly the growth trajectory needed to be re-assessed, as it was clear that the student experience was suffering, most notably in the lost sense of community. Staff considered that large class sizes on the masters courses devalued the whole nature of the PGT student experience which should be far more interactive and intensive than at present. Ideally, Masters classes should have a maximum of 30 to ensure a good experience for all postgraduate students. The growing problems with mental health and recorded 'good cause' applications were considered evidence of a declining student experience for some and this is outlined further at 3.3.3. The overall impact resulted in a situation that was both unmanageable and stretched staff to capacity. Additionally, while there were a number of high performing courses, not all the courses were economically viable. The Panel viewed the current system as unsustainable and that urgent action was required to address the challenges outlined. The Review Panel **recommends** that the College and School, as a matter of priority, in consultation with the Subject, review the current postgraduate provision and recruitment, taking into consideration the sustainability and impact on staff and the Student Experience. (see item 3.3.3)

Progression

3.1.3   From the SER the Review Panel observed that the Subject's retention figures were generally good and above average trends. The Panel noted from the documentation for from sessions 2015, 2016 and 2019 that the Subject had a higher level of Credit Refused in their statistics. The Head of Subject did not have access to this data but thought that this was probably due to the high number of students, possibly

due to the intake from MEduc students which accounted for just over 10% of the Subject's student cohort. The Review Panel recommends that the School examine the statistics with a view to identifying whether a pattern emerged for those students who received Credit Refused and to research potential strategies to reduce the instances of Credit Refused.

3.2   Equality and Diversity

3.2.1   From the SER, it was evident there was a clear awareness of the forms of diversity and a commitment by staff to address equality and diversity issues both in relation to staffing and in relation to student recruitment and teaching.

3.3   Supporting Students in their Learning

3.3.1   The Review Panel met with a small number of students from both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and all students expressed their satisfaction with the quality of their learning opportunities and the level of support provided by both academic and administrative staff. All students agreed they would recommend the Subject and the Honours courses and found the level of staff care motivating.

3.3.2   The SER referred to the challenges that the increase in numbers of students presented in developing and maintaining a sense of community within the Subject, particularly at postgraduate level. At the meetings with the Review Panel, both undergraduate and postgraduate students echoed this sentiment.   Students generally welcomed the Sociology Café but had reservations about its current form in achieving its aim of developing a better sense of community. The lack of a dedicated space was a drawback and some students thought the café was more an opportunity to interact with staff than with other students.   The Panel asked the students for suggestions about how to address the sense of community and they considered that the Sociology Student Society might be more effective in creating a sense of community; however, the students acknowledged that this would require greater involvement from themselves. The SER stated that the Careers Service had undertaken work with the Society to assist with building their membership and activity.

3.3.3   [1]With regard to postgraduate students, as noted at 1.1.2, postgraduate class reps had expressed their concerns regarding the changing nature of the masters' experience due to the rising numbers of students. This was confirmed at the meeting with postgraduate students who outlined the challenges that large class sizes presented and the subsequent loss of community. While the students acknowledged the efforts by staff to create a sense of community through specific events such as film nights, the size of the student postgraduate community made it difficult to connect with people on the same course. The Panel acknowledged the challenges that large student numbers presented in developing a sense of community, welcomed the introduction of the Sociology Café

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and supported the Subject's plans to expand this beyond the Honours cohort. However, in view of the challenges presented by student mental health issues (3.3.4), the Panel considered that further work was required to offset the sense of isolation and "separateness" experienced by some students, particularly at postgraduate level. See 3.1.2 for the recommendation relating to postgraduate student numbers. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject, with the support of the School and College, explore approaches to building a greater sense of community among the student cohort including further development of the Sociology Café and the Sociology Student Society.

3.3.4   The Review Panel noted from the SER that a substantial issue facing the Subject was the increase in good cause claims and students with mental health issues. The SER stated that between the PSR held in 2012-13 and 2018-19 there had been an increase of approximately 300 percent in good cause claims, with a 400 percent increase of cases where students applied for long extensions of three weeks or more or had not completed an assignment due to extenuating circumstances. In exploring the issue of good cause, the Panel noted that the issue was less about the number of cases and more about the rise in individuals submitting multiple applications, which had seen increases ranging from 4-25%. The Subject considered that a contributory factor to the problem was the misunderstanding by students on what good cause meant with some students thinking it meant their work would be marked differently.

3.3.5   The Panel noted that, while students could apply for good cause on MyCampus, they were unable to apply online for an extension for assignments.   The Head of Subject believed that students were deterred by the requirement to submit personal information online. He commented that the previous system required students to complete a physical copy of the form, which encouraged the provision of fuller evidence in support of their application.   In view of this observation, the Review Panel **recommends** that the observations regarding the good cause form and online process be forwarded to the Senate Office for consideration.

3.3.6   The Review Panel was concerned to note, from the SER, the increase in good cause claims and student mental health problems, which subsequently affected the wellbeing of staff who felt unqualified to deal with complex mental health issues.   The SER stated that in 2012-13 this had involved 3.6 percent of cases, which had risen to 25.6 percent in 2018-19. Staff confirmed that the rise in students with more serious mental health problems was challenging, particularly it was perceived that often students were unable to access support from the student counselling service. In general, staff found supporting and managing students with mental health problems challenging and felt that more signposting to available resources would be helpful. There had been improvements in the circulation of information on resources for staff. However, the Head of Subject advised that, while staff training would be helpful, staff were wary regarding this issue and that the University needed to recognise the burden on staff as first contact.   The Panel shared the Subject's concerns, and highlighted the availability of training sessions provided by the SRC. These included Mental Health First Aid training and 'Mind Your Mate' sessions which were open to both staff and students. The Review Panel considered that it was important that mental health resources were widely publicised and **recommends** that the Mental Health Working Group should consider how to disseminate information on

training and support available to staff such as Mental Health First Aid training and 'Mind Your Mate'.

3.3.7 In the SER, the Subject outlined the initiatives they had introduced in endeavouring to support students including a 'Who to Speak to' document available through Moodle and aimed at directing students to appropriate forms of support. Additionally, the Subject operated a good cause committee comprised of three staff members. The team operated by splitting the caseload; however, the team were familiar with all cases which assisted continuity, which was of particular importance in relation to complex cases. The Review Panel **commends** the Subject for its proactive stance on this issue. At the staff meeting, the Panel noted that another University operated a centralised system for good cause claims, which ensured consistency of practice while alleviating the administrative pressure on academic staff and ensured consistency of practice across the institution. The Review Panel **recommends** that this practice be drawn to the attention of the Senate Office.

3.3.8 [2]The SER stated, "Students seem increasingly to have less direct contact with their adviser of study and to rely more on the assistance of the team of primarily administrative staff who serve in the advising offices of Social Science and Arts." (SER, p24). While there were no signs that students were concerned about this lack of contact, at the meeting with students, the Review Panel explored how the advising system currently operated within the Subject. The main source of contact appeared to be via email and the general experience among the students was that of minimal contact, although staff advised that only students with issues tended to contact them. Staff and students both expressed the view that the system needed to be more supportive. Contributing factors for the shortcomings of the system were the lack of formal training for staff in the advising role together with the need for the role to have a more pastoral approach as students preferred to contact familiar people. The Head of Subject and staff considered that an improved advising system could relieve pressure on the number of good cause cases. As there was no official advising system operating at postgraduate level, the situation was more precarious. To offset this, staff operated an open-door policy, which the students welcomed; however, they agreed that a more systematic process was required. The Review Panel acknowledged that there were challenges with the current advising system particularly in conjunction with the pressures that staff experienced in relation to good cause and student mental health issues. However, the Panel emphasised the importance for students to be aware of the support available through their advisers and although students had not expressed explicit concerns, it was necessary for the advising system to function effectively. The Review Panel **recommends** that the College undertake a review of the operation of the current advising system, particularly in relation to the support required for postgraduate students.

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3.3.9 [3]The Review Panel noted, from the SSLC minutes and meetings with students, that the Subject did not undertake regular lecture recording. The undergraduate students considered lecture recording would be helpful in reinforcing their learning.   It was evident from the Panel's discussions there was strong staff opposition to the practice with staff contending that lecture recording correlated with a fall in lecture attendance. In addition, staff stated that the aim of lectures was to point students in the direction of independent critical learning and recording would encourage students to regurgitate the lectures in assignments and exams.   While the Panel acknowledged that, in some instances, lecture recording was not possible due to lack of adequate recording facilities, the experience of using lecture recording in other parts of the University is that it did not impact on attendance in the long term. Moreover, it was evident that any lecture was open to regurgitation by students and the solution lay in careful question setting. In order for students to have sufficient learning support, as outlined in the Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy and Lecture Recording Policy, the Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject ensure that lecture recording is undertaken, wherever possible, by all staff or alternative provision provided - including uploading slides to Moodle.

Postgraduate

3.3.10 The Review Panel met with two postgraduate students who were satisfied overall with their programmes and would recommend the Subject to others. When asked why they had chosen Glasgow the students' reasons included the wide range of courses offered and the top ranking status of the Subject.

3.3.11 The students expressed concerns regarding the large class sizes and lack of community identified in other sections of the report.   The students advised that they had had trouble in obtaining personalised feedback due to the class size, although there had been some improvement in this process as the semester progressed.

3.3.12 The issue of core modules as electives was raised with one student advising that she did not have all the relevant information at the time of selection. Another comment made was that they did not understand why the semester one Core course was compulsory in view of the diversity of the group's interests. The Subject should ensure that students are provided with guidance on how to access information on available elective modules at the appropriate time.

Graduate Attributes

3.3.13 The Review Panel noted from the SER that the Subject aimed to embed graduate attributes through their modes of assessment, experiential trips and highlighted the collaborative dissertations undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Review Panel was impressed with this provision, appreciating that it provided students with the opportunity to develop their skills and links with prospective employers.

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Both undergraduate and postgraduate students considered that they received adequate information on graduate attributes. The Review Panel **commends** the Subject's practice of collaborative dissertation.

3.4   Student Engagement

Feedback Mechanisms

3.4.1   The SER outlined the recent changes to the format and timings of the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC). The SSLC meetings had been restructured with separate meetings at undergraduate and postgraduate levels aimed at providing more time for clearer discussions. Overall, the students who met with the Panel considered that the class rep system worked well.

3.4.2   [4]Some students expressed unease that the Subject responses to student concerns could be misaligned and the students were uncertain whether this was due to a misunderstanding of the issues raised.   While acknowledging that the Subject attempted to address issues, students said they would prefer that the Subject clearly outlined their intended course of action. In the event that no solution was possible, the students would wish to know this. The Review Panel welcomed the redesign of the SSLC and congratulated the Subject on its proactive stance in this regard, however, there seemed to be a disconnect between issues raised and closing the loop. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject review the current processes, relating to responding to student feedback, to ensure there is clarity around these issues and to ensure that all responses are unambiguous. The Subject should engage the class reps to provide feedback to students, possibly via social media.

The Review Panel was concerned to note that staff did not routinely upload their lecture slides in advance of the lecture. The Head of Subject expressed surprise that this was not routine practice. The Panel gleaned from discussions that staff were resistant to this practice, asserting there was no substantive evidence that disproved student drop off occurred. The Panel disagreed with this pedagogy and referenced the Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy, which clearly outlined the requirements for the provision of teaching materials.   The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject undertake a review of the practice of uploading lecture slides to ensure that students are not disadvantaged and ensure staff are informed on the requirements of the Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy.

Course Evaluation

3.4.3   [4]The Review Panel noted, from the SER, the Subject's concerns regarding the move from paper copies of the course evaluation form to an online version.   The SER detailed a response level of between 54.2-81% for questionnaires issued in hard copy while the highest online response was 46.9%. The Panel appreciated the Subject's concerns;

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however, there are alternative processes to those outlined in the SER. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject liaises with the Senate Office and consults the good practice guide on the Senate Office Website to develop a strategy for increasing student response rates for EvaSys course evaluation surveys.

4   Learning and Teaching

Curriculum Design

4.1.1   MRes Methods Training

The SER stated that, at postgraduate level, there were challenges regarding the adequacy/fit of MRes Methods Training. The Review Panel noted that student feedback consistently raised concerns about this provision and the relevance of the programme. Contributing factors included class sizes as discussed at 3.1.2; however, the SER queried the suitability of the courses for Sociology students exacerbated by the need for the programme to appeal to a broad student base. There appeared to be a lack of consistency regarding core provision at postgraduate level with courses requiring students to undertake anything from one to three core modules. The Head of Subject advised that this was organised at College and School level and tended to be an isolated occurrence, however, he advised the situation had improved and the Subject expected to be consulted regarding future decisions relating to this provision.

4.1.2   The Review Panel noted from student feedback that sociological theory was not taught until Honours level. At the meeting with the Panel, the students expressed concern that this would be detrimental to their study of sociology and indicated they would prefer this to be taught at an earlier stage. The Head of Subject advised that the Subject had consciously decided not to overwhelm students with theory at Levels 1 and 2, but elements had been introduced at Level 2. However, the Panel noted from their discussions with students that, though not explicitly labelled as theory, the students were being tutored in theory as evidenced through their knowledge of Marxist theory and decolonization. The students expressed their enjoyment of these topics; however, they suggested that it might be more practical to start the Level 1 course with the Sociology of Everyday Life, instead of introducing it at a later stage. The Panel was most gratified to see that theoretical teaching was evident at Level 1 and would suggest that the Subject explicitly signpost this more. The students also commented that they considered that they required research methods courses from this stage also.

4.1.3   The Review Panel noted, from the SER, that the School was represented on the School Learning and Teaching Groups at both UG and PGT levels, which was an appropriate forum for sharing good practice across the School. However, it was noted also from the SER that the Sociology Learning and Teaching Group, which was a suitable place for the exchange, and identification of good practice, specific to the subject area, had not met for some time although the Subject planned to reintroduce the meeting of the Group. The Panel agreed there were clear areas of good practice; however, there was not a strong sense of how they were being rolled out across the Subject. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject invigorate efforts to revive the Sociology Learning and Teaching Group and to ensure regular meetings to enhance the identification and

sharing of good practice across the Subject. The Subject may wish to consult with LEADS for guidance on this issue.

4.1.4   At the Review Panel's meeting with key staff, the academic staff expressed their thanks to the administrative staff for their excellent support and asked that this be recorded.

4.1.5   The SER outlined the Subject's plan to review the Sociology postgraduate dissertation provision, which aimed to assist students with identifying a dissertation topic at an earlier stage. The Review Panel noted that the impact of increased postgraduate numbers presented challenges in appropriate project/dissertation supervision. Due to the numbers of staff with specific interests, dissertation supervision overburdened those staff with more general experience. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject look at the numbers of PGT students any individual should supervise and explore whether it is possible to devise a method of more equitable distribution of projects for supervision.

4.1.6   [5]The Review Panel explored Study Abroad Year (SAY) with the Level 3 and 4 students who advised that they were discouraged from SAY as they would miss the dissertation training sessions and therefore have to write the proposal with less guidance. Additionally, the enrolment process for dissertation subject precluded SAY students, as they could not access Moodle while abroad. This raised issues of equity and it was evident that the current dissertation system disadvantaged and discouraged students from undertaking SAY. Therefore, the Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject take steps to ensure that potential students wishing to undertake SAY are not discouraged or disadvantaged in the choice or support for their dissertation.

4.1.7   [5]The Review Panel noted that work based learning was particularly strong in some postgraduate provision, specifically on the MSc Media, Communications and International Journalism, where students have work placements, and in the provision of collaborative dissertation opportunities on the MSc Global Migrations and the range of Criminology PGT programmes. However, from discussion with the Head of Subject, the Panel noted that while there was no explicit work-based learning at undergraduate level, students could undertake collaborative dissertations with employer organisations. Due to the diversity of careers arising from a Sociology degree, it was not possible to provide information on specific career paths, however, it was noted that the Careers Service provided helpful support to students.   The Review Panel considered that it was desirable for the work-based learning opportunities to be made more explicit to undergraduate students and therefore **recommends** that the Subject take a more proactive approach to developing possible employment links with the dissertation for undergraduate students.

Approach to Intended Learning Outcomes

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4.1.8   From the documentation, the Review Panel was confident that the ILOs were outlined explicitly in all programme specifications and was satisfied that these were appropriate. However, the Level 1 and 2 students were aware of the ILOs but considered that there was no consistency and would have welcomed these to be made available. The Panel suggest that the Subject signpost more clearly the existence of ILOs to the students.

Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching

4.1.9   From discussion with the undergraduate students, it was evident that the practice for submission of assignments varied; students submitted online or handed in one or two physical copies of their work.   The students were critical of the latter, viewing it as wasteful, unnecessarily stressful and costly and suggested that online submission would be more environmentally friendly. This was also a particular problem for home and disabled students. The Review Panel explored this with the Head of Subject who advised that a pilot of online assessment and feedback was being conducted. However, he advised there were challenges associated with online submission and highlighted that, currently, staff met with Honours students to return their work and any subsequent switch to online submission would lose this vital interaction. However, there were also issues with physical hand-ins with relatively low rates of collection by students.   The Panel appreciated the challenges that both processes presented, however, considered that the current system was flawed and could disadvantage some students. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject, in conjunction with the current online pilot, in liaison with LEADS, review the current assignment submission process and consider viable alternatives, including the option of submission of assignments in Word document format which would enable feedback to be provided via tracked changes.

4.1.10 The postgraduate students had experience of online and physical hand-ins. Generally, both students preferred online submission but acknowledged the merits of physical hand-ins.

4.1.11 The Review Panel explored with the Head of School the impact of Brexit on students applying to Study Abroad. He advised the Panel that most of their students chose to study outwith Europe, so had not been affected by the situation to date. With regard to Erasmus, they were less certain and would have to wait until these agreements were finalised before any impact would be evident.

4.1.12 The Review Panel explored whether the staff were receptive to advances in digital technology. The Panel noted that some areas were stronger than others in this area, however the tutorial programmes did involve interactive learning. The Head of Subject acknowledged that it would be beneficial for staff to engage more with digital technology but highlighted that the pressure of staff workloads and resources presented obstacles.

4.2   **Assessment and Feedback**

4.2.1   The SER outlined that the Subject had increased the range of assessments offered to students and the Review Panel noted there was a combination of formative and summative assessments. However, the Panel was concerned about the viability of

frequently setting a 4000-word essay and the subsequent impact on staff in marking these assignments.   The Panel suggested that it might be timely to consider reviewing this form of assessment; however staff commented that, while they acknowledged the benefits of discarding this particular assessment, this gave rise to other concerns. Staff mentioned issues relating to deadlines, the impact on good cause applications and the workload implications of administrative staff of alternative methods of assessment.

4.2.2   The Review Panel noted the Subject's response to student expectations regarding feedback had the potential to impact on the NSS.   In response, the Subject had introduced innovative methods, including Moodle based explanations of the assessment process and highlighted the use of the stop/start/continue method of informal feedback. From discussions with students, they were unaware of the stop/start/continue form of feedback. The Review Panel considered this was a potentially innovative method of providing ongoing feedback during a course and suggests that this method of informal feedback is conveyed more clearly to the students. From discussion with the postgraduate students, the Panel noted that the students were unfamiliar with feedback guidance and had commented on the absence of a course calendar. However, the students advised that, generally, they were kept informed of any delays in the return of feedback. The exception to this was if the student was not in the core course when there can be a disconnect in receiving updates.

4.3   Resources for Learning and Teaching (staffing and physical)

Staffing

4.3.1   The Review Panel noted, from the SER, that the Subject's concerns regarding the level of administrative support at postgraduate level, was exacerbated by a high turnover of staff, resulting in the loss of knowledge and experience. The Head of Subject advised that a temporary postgraduate administrator had been appointed and hoped the position would be made permanent. In view of the expansion in postgraduate programmes and student numbers, it was evident that a single postgraduate administrator was not enough, particularly in relation to succession planning and sickness absence. While the issues of resources for staffing lies outwith the remit of the Review Panel, the Panel had serious concerns regarding the impact of the postgraduate expansion and would encourage the School and College to consider this issue in the wider scrutiny of postgraduate recruitment.

 Learning and Teaching Space

4.3.2   The Review Panel acknowledged the challenges presented by the lack of appropriate teaching spaces, particularly in relation to the growth in student numbers over recent years. This was the case, particularly, with regard to those student and staff with particular issues of accessibility. Based predominantly in the Adam Smith Building, common complaints ranged from the allocation of multiple rooms for courses, the allocation of unsuitable rooms and loss of teaching time travelling between lectures. All students with whom the Panel met echoed these concerns. The Panel acknowledged there was no immediate solution to these issues, however, the Review Panel, **recommends** that this issue regarding unsuitable teaching accommodation should be highlighted to the Director of Estates and Commercial Services.

4.4   Engaging and Supporting Staff

4.4.1   The Review Panel had concerns regarding the workload model, which were shared by the Head of Subject; however, he advised that the workload model was being reviewed at School level.

Early career support

4.4.2   The Review Panel met with early career staff and tutors. Both groups agreed that they were well supported and managed by the Subject and expressed appreciation for the excellent Subject administrative support provided. The Review Panel **commends** the Subject for its support for Early Career staff and Tutors.

4.4.3   However, those in attendance were critical of several processes at both College and School level. All staff at the meeting expressed concern regarding the increase in postgraduate student numbers with some early career staff commenting on the impact this had on their workload. This issue is addressed at 3.1.2.

4.4.4   From the SER, the Review Panel noted that early career staff on the ECDP had automatic enrolment on the PGCap programme. While tutors were not eligible for the ECDP programme, the School had agreed that tutors could enrol on the PGCap. However, from discussion with the tutors, the Panel noted that their workload left insufficient time to undertake the PGCap. The early career staff described a disconnect between the aims of the PGCap and professional development and considered that this required review. The early career staff expressed confusion regarding promotion criteria, believing that they were required to achieve all the criteria in order to qualify for promotion. The Panel clarified this was not the case and that the criteria was for staff to achieve a preponderance. The Panel was concerned at this misunderstanding and agreed that this information should be clarified with all eligible staff as soon as possible.

4.4.5   The Review Panel noted the frustration of many of the tutors in relation to contracts, workload and a lack of a clear career pathway. In addition to being on short term contracts, the Panel noted that several lecturers were on the Learning, Teaching and Scholarship Track, having switched from Research & Teaching contracts to secure lectureships.   However, there was little or no information on how to revert to the R&T contract, if desired.

4.4.6   The Review Panel noted that there was dissatisfaction with the workload model, which, among other things, omitted to include hidden work such as time spent responding to students via email.   Tutors had been advised that their workload would be adjusted to allow time to apply for scholarships, which did not happen in practice, due to the size of their workload. The SER stated, "…marking, this was especially stark for Tutors who, with their heavier teaching load than GTAs, are on occasion given up to 100 essays with the expectation of marking them in two weeks." (SER, p10). This was confirmed by staff who provided examples of being unable to take leave over the Christmas period due to their marking workload.

4.4.7   The SER had highlighted the difficulty that tutors and graduate teaching assistants (GTA) encountered regarding payment. These included a lack of clarity concerning what each payslip covered and occasions where no payment was made at all due to administrative failure.

4.4.8   The Review Panel was most concerned at the impact that the continued increase in student numbers had on early career staff, tutors and GTAs (see 3.1.2). Additionally, the Panel had serious concerns regarding the lack of support and career development afforded to tutors. The Panel acknowledged that the payment and contract issues were outwith the scope of the Subject; however, it was essential that they were addressed at the earliest opportunity. The Review Panel **recommends** that the School review the contracts and workloads of early career staff and tutors to ensure parity and to identify possible career pathways. In addition, the School should review the current system for paying tutors and GTAs to ensure that non-payment does not occur. This should include the review of best practice in other colleges.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

4.4.9   The Review Panel noted that the GTAs considered that they were well supported through teaching and marking support. The Review Panel noted the comments from the Staff Survey regarding the dissatisfaction of GTAs regarding their employment conditions. This is discussed at 4.4.8.

5   Academic Standards

5.1.1   The Review Panel considered that the Subject had a variety of robust and effective procedures in place, which ensure that the Subject is engaged in a continual process of self-reflection and self-evaluation regarding academic and pedagogical practice.

Currency and Validity of Programmes

5.1.2   The Panel, guided by the views of the External Subject Specialist, confirmed that, at the time of the Review, the programmes offered by the Subject were current and valid in the light of developing knowledge and practice within the subject area.

5.1.3   The SER had outlined the challenges that the Subject experienced with the Course Approval process, more specifically the challenges in obtaining approval for courses. Further discussion disclosed that, while the process was cumbersome, there were negative associations due to the critical tone of feedback on course documentation, which provided little or no guidance regarding the required changes. The Head of Subject advised that staff had been discouraged, at School and College level, from developing new courses, particularly at honours level. This gave staff a sense of disempowerment and frustration, particularly among new colleagues. The Panel noted that the loss of staff affected the delivery of courses due to the lack of expertise. Staffing also affected the development of new courses.   In view of the experience and professionalism of the staff, the Head of Subject considered that the Subject should have more autonomy and ownership of their teaching programmes. He advised the panel, however, that there had been some improvements due to the inclusion of a Subject level

representative on the course approval committee.   The Review Panel concurred that it was imperative that the knowledge and expertise of staff was acknowledged throughout course development and approval.   The Review Panel, while welcoming the recent developments, **recommends** that the College and School continue to ensure that the Subject is consulted and involved at all stages of the course approval process.

6   Summary of perceived strengths and areas for improvement
6.1   Key strengths

The Review Panel identified the following areas as key strengths:

- Established and leading provider of Sociology education in UK
- Real and passionate commitment to subject core themes of equality and diversity
- Excellent engagement and communication with student concerns and issues
- Wide range of provision
- Subject displays intellectual coherence
- Committed to continual improvement
- Excellent standard of student work
- Clear link between research and teaching interests

6.2   Areas for improvement

The Review Panel highlighted the following areas as opportunities for improvement:

- Need for clearer involvement in strategic planning
- Require a strategy to address increasing student numbers particularly at postgraduate level.
- Generating a sense of community among students
- Advising System
- Lecture Recording and provision of lecture slides

Specific recommendations addressing these areas for work are listed below, as are a number of further recommendations on particular matters.

7   Conclusion

The Review Panel was impressed with the dedication and enthusiasm of the staff and students and with the firm focus of the Subject to provide a high level of teaching and support for students. The Subject demonstrated a number of strengths, as well as an awareness of the areas requiring improvement. The most substantive of these are reflected in the commendations and recommendations below.

7.1   Commendations

The Review Panel commends Sociology on the following, which are listed **in order of appearance** in this report:

Commendation 1

> The Review Panel **commends** the Subject for its commitment to providing a research-led, wide range of provision together with a high level of support to students. (Paragraph 2.5.1]

Commendation 2

> The Review Panel **commends** the Subject's practice of collaborative dissertation. [Paragraph 3.3.13]

Commendation 3

> The Review Panel commends the Subject's bespoke centralised system for recording and processing good cause claims.   [Paragraph 3.3.7]

7.2   Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made to support Sociology in its reflection and to enhance provision in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are **grouped together** by the areas for improvement/enhancement and are **ranked in order of priority within each section**.

Strategic Vision

Recommendation 1

1.1   The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject has representation on the relevant School and College Committees and is consulted on all key strategic planning and appointment processes concerning the Subject. [Paragraph 2.4.3]

> **For the attention of: The Head of School**
>
> **Head of College**
>
> **For information: Head of Subject**

1.2   The Review Panel, while welcoming the recent developments, **recommends** that the College and School continue to ensure that the Subject is consulted and involved at all stages of the course approval process. [Paragraph 5.1.3]

> **For the attention of: The Head of School**
>
> **Head of College**
>
> **For information: Head of Subject**

Recommendation 2

> The Review Panel **recommends** that the College and School, as a matter of priority, in consultation with the Subject, review the current postgraduate provision and recruitment, taking into consideration the sustainability and impact on staff and the Student Experience. [Paragraph 3.1.2]

Recommendation 3

The Review Panel **recommends** that the School review the contracts and workloads of early career staff and tutors to ensure parity and to identify possible career pathways. In addition, the School should review the current system for paying tutors and GTAs to ensure that occurrences of non-payment do not occur. This should include the review of best practice in other colleges. [Paragraph 4.4.8]

For the attention of: The Head of School
For information: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 4

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject look at the numbers of PGT students any individual should supervise and explore whether it is possible to devise a method of more equitable distribution of projects for supervision. [Paragraph 4.1.5]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 5

5.1   In order for students to have sufficient learning support, as outlined in the Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy and Lecture Recording Policy, the Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject ensure that lecture recording is undertaken, wherever possible, by all staff or alternatives provided, including uploading slides to Moodle. [Paragraph 3.3.9]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

5.2   The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject undertake a review of the practice of uploading lecture slides to ensure that students are not disadvantaged and ensure staff are informed on the requirements of the Accessible and Inclusive Learning Policy. [Paragraph 3.4.3]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 6

6.1   The Review Panel **recommends** that the College undertake a review of the current advising system, particularly in relation to the support required for postgraduate students.   [Paragraph 3.3.8]

For the attention of: The Head of College
For information: The Head of School
The Head of Subject

6.2   [6]The Review Panel recommends that the School examine the statistics with a view to identifying whether a pattern emerged for those students who received Credit Refused and to research potential strategies to reduce the instances of Credit Refused. [Paragraph 3.1.3]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 7

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject, with the support of the School and College, explore approaches to build a sense of community among the student cohort including further development of the Sociology Café and the Sociology Student Society. [Paragraph 3.3.3]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject
For information: The Head of School
The Head of College

Recommendation 8

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject review the current processes, relating to responding to student feedback, to ensure there is clarity around these issues and to ensure that all responses are unambiguous. The Subject should engage the class reps to provide feedback to students, possibly via social media. [Paragraph 3.4.2]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 9

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject invigorate efforts to revive the Sociology Learning and Teaching Group and to ensure regular meetings to enhance the identification and sharing of good practice across the Subject. The Subject may wish to consult with LEADS for guidance on this issue. [Paragraph 4.1.3]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 10

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject take steps to ensure that potential students wishing to undertake SAY are not discouraged or disadvantaged in the choice or support for their dissertation.   [Paragraph 4.1.6]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

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[6] The second item under Recommendation 6 was an additional recommendation requested by Academic Standards Committee which has been agreed by the PSR Panel Convener

Recommendation 11

The Review Panel considered that it was desirable for the work-based learning opportunities to be made more explicit to undergraduate students and therefore **recommends** that the Subject take a more proactive approach to developing work links with the dissertation for undergraduate students.   [Paragraph 4.1.7]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 12

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject, in conjunction with the current online pilot and in liaison with LEADS, review the current submission process and consider viable alternatives, including the option of submission of assignments in Word document format which would enable feedback to be provided via tracked changes. [Paragraph 4.1.9]

For the attention of: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 13

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject liaises with the Senate Office and consults the good practice guide on the Senate Office Website to develop a strategy for increasing student response rates for EvaSys course evaluation surveys. [Paragraph 3.4.4]

For the attention of: The Head of School

Matters for attention – outside of Subject or School

Recommendation 14

The Review Panel considered that it was important that mental health resources were widely publicised and **recommends** that the Mental Health Working Group should consider how to disseminate information on training and support available to staff such as Mental Health First Aid training and 'Mind Your Mate'. [Paragraph 3.3.6]

For the attention of the Convener of the Mental Health Working Group
For information: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 15

15.1   The Review Panel **recommends** that the observations regarding the good cause form and online process be forwarded to the Senate Office for consideration. [Paragraph 3.3.5]

For the attention of: The Assistant Director of the Senate Office

For information: The Head of Subject

15.2   At the staff meeting, the Panel was advised that another University operated a centralised system for good cause claims, which ensured consistency of practice across the institution while alleviating the administrative pressure on academic staff. The Review Panel **recommends** that this issue be drawn to the attention of the Senate Office. [Paragraph 3.3.7]

For the attention of: The Assistant Director of the Senate Office

For information: The Head of Subject

Recommendation 16

The Review Panel **recommends** that this issue regarding unsuitable teaching accommodation be highlighted to the Director of Estates and Commercial Services. [Paragraph 4.3.2]

For the attention of: The Director of Estates and Commercial Services

For information: The Head of Subject