

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 28 May 2010

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Report of the Review of Urban Studies held on 15 and 16 March
2010**

Mrs Ruth Cole, Clerk to the Review Panel

Review Panel:

Professor Graham Caie	Clerk of Senate and Vice Principal (Convener)
Professor Craig Watkins	University of Sheffield (External Subject Specialist)
Mr Tommy Gore	Students' Representative Council
Dr Robert McMaster	Department of Management (Cognate Member)
Professor Adrienne Scullion	Senate Assessor on Court
Dr Cathy Bovill	Learning and Teaching Centre
Mrs Ruth Cole	Senate Office (Clerk)

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information

- 1.1.1 The Department of Urban Studies is based in the Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences. The Department was established in 1996 when the ESRC Centre for Housing Research and Urban Studies merged with parts of the Department of Social and Economic Research. The Department's work is of an interdisciplinary nature, covering Urban and Housing Studies, Planning, Real Estate and Public Policy. When University restructuring is implemented in August 2010, the Department of Urban Studies will join with four other departments and two research centres to form the School of Social and Political Sciences in the College of Social Sciences.
- 1.1.2 The Department is located in Bute Gardens where there is a limited amount of teaching space. Students of the Department use IT and Library facilities in the adjacent Adam Smith Building. The bulk of Department teaching takes place in central teaching rooms.
- 1.1.3 The previous DPTLA took place in 2003-04 since when the undergraduate programme in Social Policy has been replaced by Public Policy, and there has been a significant expansion of postgraduate programmes.
- 1.1.4 The Self Evaluation Report was prepared by Mr Nick Bailey (Director of Learning and Teaching), Dr Susan Deeley (Programme Director, Undergraduate Programme) and Professor Kenneth Gibb (Head of Department). The draft SER was circulated to all staff for comment, and feedback received was discussed with key teaching staff and the Departmental Management Team before being finalised. Students were briefed on the purpose of DPTLA and were invited to submit comments prior to the drafting of the SER. Feedback was sought through Moodle and by e-mailing students directly.

Students were subsequently asked to comment on the draft SER. The Review Panel welcomed the open and reflective approach of the SER, and the acknowledgement of areas needing further development. The Panel noted the positive attitude adopted in seeking the Panel's view on specific issues. The Panel **commends** the Department for this approach to the task of preparing the SER.

1.1.5 During the one and a half days' visit, the Review Panel met with the Dean, Professor Mike French, and the Head of Department, Professor Kenneth Gibb. The Panel also met with eleven members of staff, 1 probationary member of staff, 4 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), 7 postgraduate taught (PGT) students and 9 undergraduate students.

1.1.6 The Department has 30 academic staff (18 lecturing, 12 research) (FTE 29.6), 12 members of support staff (FTE 8.3) and 14 honorary and emeritus staff.

1.1.7 Student numbers for 2009-10 are:

Students	Headcount	FTE
Level 1	196	65
Level 2	107	35
Honours	81	60
Undergraduate Total	384	160
Postgraduate Taught	252	118
Postgraduate Research*	28	15

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

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

Undergraduate

MA Hons in Public Policy (Single and Joint)

In addition the Department oversees the workplace-based Bachelors in Community Learning and Development which is provided by the Linked Work and Training Trust.

Postgraduate

MSc/PGDip Housing Studies

MSc/PGDip Urban Policy and Practice

MSc/PGDip Public Policy

MSc/PGDip Real Estate Planning and Regeneration

MSc/PGDip Public Policy and Management (delivered in partnership with the Department of Management)

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

MSc Management and International Real Estate (Lead Department: Management)

PGCert Management Development (Glasgow Housing Association) (Lead Department: Management)

MSc Criminology and Criminal Justice (Lead Department: Sociology, Anthropology and Applied Social Sciences)

Research Training Programme in quantitative and qualitative methods (Faculty Graduate School)

BA/MA Architecture (Mackintosh School of Architecture, Glasgow School of Art)

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

- 2.1 The SER set out the overall aims of the Department's provision. The Review Panel was satisfied that these aims supported the University Strategic Plan. While the Department had a Research Strategy, there was no specific Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Panel noted that the Real Estate, Planning and Regeneration Programme had its own stated educational philosophy (as does the Undergraduate Programme), and considered that it would be helpful to have a similar statement in relation to all of the Department's taught provision. The Head of Department acknowledged the challenge of teasing this out in the context of the breadth of the Department's provision.
- 2.2 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department develop an explicit Learning and Teaching Strategy. This should include the articulation of a subject-specific philosophy for education in Urban Studies and provide a framework and timetable for the on-going development of the Department's work.

3. An Evaluation of the Student Learning Experience

3.1 Aims

The aims of the Department's undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes are laid out in programme specifications, though at postgraduate level the aims are clearer on some programmes than on others. The Review Panel concurred with the view expressed in the SER that the aims on all postgraduate programmes should be reviewed, to share good practice across programmes, to bring consistency of format and to articulate the differences between the programmes.

3.2 Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

The Intended Learning Outcomes for all programmes and courses are laid out in the relevant programme specifications. Again, the Department acknowledged in the SER that the documented ILOs do not fully reflect what is currently delivered and that a general review of these, particularly at postgraduate level, should be undertaken. The Review Panel wishes to highlight the importance of reflecting in the ILOs the good practice that takes place in the Department (one example noted by the Panel where this does currently happen is the CPD planning ILO within the Masters in Public Policy and Management).

Recommendation on Aims and ILOs

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department carry out a review of the Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes of programmes and courses, such review to be informed by the Department's Learning and Teaching Strategy (see paragraph 2.2).

Key staff indicated that it would be realistic to undertake a thorough review of Aims and ILOs within a year.

3.3 *Assessment, Feedback and Achievement*

Methods of Assessment

- 3.3.1 The SER noted the Department's relative reliance on traditional methods of assessment and outlined its somewhat mixed experience of other methods. Key staff who met with the Review Panel reported that, at a recent Staff-Student Liaison Committee meeting, undergraduate students had been enthusiastic about the introduction of tutorial-based group work. Staff confirmed that they were committed to developing this (not least to bring them into line with practice in the other departments joining with Urban Studies in the new Social and Political Sciences School) but noted that achieving an appropriate format required considerable work.
- 3.3.2 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel discussed some of the non-traditional forms of assessment such as the reflective journal undertaken during their placement on the undergraduate course 'Values in Action'. They also mentioned written assignments, such as report writing on policy options. While there appeared to be something of a lack of confidence in tackling these tasks, the students saw the value in them and found them interesting.
- 3.3.3 One view expressed by the undergraduate students (and also mentioned by Graduate Teaching Assistants) was that credit for seminar attendance would encourage their colleagues to attend and participate fully. They referred to a poorly attended seminar for the course on Criminal Justice. The view was expressed that those who did prepare were unrewarded for their work. The Review Panel was pleased to note the proposed introduction in 2010/11 of a summatively assessed oral presentation on the Honours course 'Active Citizenship'. Undergraduate students who had participated in group work (whether assessed or not) spoke positively about the experience, of how it had helped them get to know each other, which in turn led to more confident participation in later classes and seminars. PGT students on the Housing Studies Programme and the Masters in Public Policy also spoke about non-assessed group work which they had enjoyed.
- 3.3.4 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department continue extending the range of non-traditional methods of assessment within the context of developing an assessment strategy that is consistent with the revisions made to ILOs.

Timing of assessment feedback

- 3.3.5 The SER stated that the Department aims to comply with a 4-week assessment return period. The view of key staff who met the Review Panel was that in most cases this was achieved, the exception being where there were isolated cases of staff illness. However, the Panel noted that in the National Student Survey (NSS) 2009 (which covers undergraduate students only), in response to the survey statement 'Feedback on my work has been prompt' there was a 40% positive response. This was not only an extremely disappointing score, well below the University benchmark, but it also contrasted with the strong scores achieved by the Department in all other areas.
- 3.3.6 By contrast with the NSS (2009), the view of undergraduate students who met the Review Panel was that assignments were mostly – though not always – returned within the 4-week period. One student was still awaiting the return of an assignment from semester one.
- 3.3.7 Postgraduate students reported to the Review Panel that by the deadline for submission of their second assessment, they had not received feedback on their first. The students acknowledged that this was not because the return was later than

scheduled but because the deadlines for submission of the two pieces of work were close together.

- 3.3.8 Postgraduate students on the Housing Studies Programme completed a formative assessment before their first summative assessment. It was noted that some of the students who most needed the feedback currently did not complete the formative work. Those meeting the Panel who had completed it had found the feedback to be of limited help and indicated that they were keen to receive early feedback on a summative piece of work. Staff who met with the Review Panel reflected on the possibility of making some adjustment to this practice to enable feedback on the first summative assessment to be given before submission of the second summative assessment.
- 3.3.9 At the meeting with key staff the Review Panel explored the issue of the return of feedback. On the PGT programmes, the conference style delivery (see paragraph 3.4.7) presented problems in terms of scheduling assignments so as to facilitate feedback before the next submission was due but it was noted that this approach enabled students to receive more feedback at an earlier point than traditional programme structures. Staff reported applying considerable administrative efforts to ensuring that marks were returned in good time. Their impression was that in reality the Department's performance in this area had improved in recent years, and that assignment return dates were well publicised and understood. The Review Panel was left with an unclear picture of the issues relating to the timing of feedback return, and found a mismatch between the NSS indicator on the one hand, and the views of staff and of students who met the panel on the other. Not all staff appeared to be fully aware of the issue of student dissatisfaction with the return of feedback expressed in the NSS 2009 and no clear understanding was presented by staff of what the level of dissatisfaction represented.
- 3.3.10 The Panel's view was that this was an area where the existence of a robust QA infrastructure would have ensured that the issue had been understood and addressed by the Department as a whole (see paragraph 5.2). The Panel **recommends** that the Department investigate, through dialogue with students, the NSS indicator on the lack of promptness of assessment feedback, and consider assessment scheduling, manage student expectations appropriately or take whatever other action is indicated by the results of that investigation.

Quality of feedback

- 3.3.11 Undergraduate and postgraduate students reported some variation in their satisfaction with feedback on assessed work. On the whole they found this to be detailed and helpful (undergraduate students particularly commended the comprehensive feedback sheets provided on Level 1 work). Some who had found feedback less helpful said that they felt comfortable approaching staff for more information and that when they did this, staff willingly found time to discuss the work. Some undergraduate students commented on the excellent feedback that they received from the Department of Economic and Social History and found that the feedback on Public Policy was less structured. The Panel noted that External Examiner comment on feedback on Urban Studies assessed work was complimentary in terms of both quality and quantity.

Examinations

- 3.3.12 The Review Panel explored with undergraduate students their experience of examinations. The students confirmed that examinations tested what had been taught. Level 1 students spoke about the preparations they received for examinations: there was a formative class test which they found to be useful, and a class on revision.
- 3.3.13 None of the postgraduate programmes used examinations except for the Housing Studies (HSP) Programme. The HSP students who met the Review Panel indicated

that it was a long time since any of them had taken examinations. They said that they felt the preparations for the January examination had been good though they saw it as a test of recall rather than the means for developing their learning and understanding.

Marking Practices

3.3.14 In the SER the Department described its marking practices and invited the Review Panel's view as to whether these were overly cumbersome. The Panel was impressed by the Department's commitment to rigorous marking (particularly as evidenced by the support given to Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) who were involved in marking (see paragraph 3.8.9)) but its view was that there was some scope to reduce the burden of this without compromising the quality of the process. The GTAs told the Panel that they had been asked to do less marking this year, which they believed to reflect financial pressures, leaving the full-time staff to carry out more of the task. The Panel **recommends** that the Department review its marking practices and consider the replacement of double marking with a robust moderation process which gives particular attention to borderlines at Levels 1 and 2, and the use of double rather than blind double marking of honours in-course assignments.¹

Plagiarism

3.3.15 The SER described the Department's emphasis on educating students in good academic practice (essay writing skills and referencing). Postgraduate students confirmed to the Review Panel that they had been given guidance on referencing and had undertaken a practical exercise. The Panel noted that the use of Turnitin was not compulsory in the Department and asked key staff for their views on this. They referred to the fact that the University did not require the use of Turnitin on all programmes. However, the Panel's view was that more extensive use of Turnitin could complement staff's existing work to eliminate plagiarism in students' work. The Panel **recommends** that the Department develop a rationale for dealing with plagiarism which encompasses its approach to using Turnitin.

Achievement

3.3.16 The Review Panel noted positive feedback from External Examiners indicating the high standards achieved by the Department's students.

3.4 Curriculum Design, Development and Content

Range of Provision

3.4.1 The Review Panel **commended** the expansion in provision since the last internal review in 2003-04, particularly at postgraduate level. The undergraduate Social Policy Programme had been replaced with the broader Public Policy Programme. The Panel noted some interesting aspects of this programme, such as service-learning (where academic coursework is combined with learning while on placement) and the imminent introduction of the 'Active Citizenship' Honours course. The Panel also noted the proposals currently under consideration for the semesterisation of Honours options in 2010-11, one of the main aims being to align more closely with cognate departments. The Department had started to consider similar developments at Levels 1 and 2, but had currently put these proposals into abeyance pending the University's restructuring, particularly in view of the workload associated with such a review.

3.4.2 The Review Panel was interested to know whether the expansion of postgraduate programmes was accompanied by on-going review of the viability of existing programmes. The Head of Department explained that the Masters in Urban Policy had been in existence for some 30 years and the Department was beginning to consider

¹ Clerk's Note: Since the Review visit, the University's Learning and Teaching Committee has agreed to carry out a review of marking practices across the University. This will take place in session 2010-11.

how the format might be developed in future years but the SER also showed that the highly integrated nature of the Department's PG teaching meant that there were very few marginal costs from running that programme. There was a view that the recently established Romanian model might be applied more widely, that is by offering Public Policy with specific streams. In the case of the other postgraduate programmes, the Department considered that each fulfilled a specific discipline/professional niche.

Levels 1 and 2

- 3.4.3 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel stated that they had enjoyed the Level 1 course, which gave them a broad overview of Public Policy, but there were ambivalent views about Level 2. Some of the undergraduates expressed the view that there was repetition of what had been covered in Level 1. This point was put to key staff who met with the Panel and they explained that there was a definite progression in the way that the various topics were studied at Level 2, but it was acknowledged that this might need to be communicated to students more clearly.
- 3.4.4 Undergraduates raised the fact that the curriculum was solely focussed on Public Policy in the UK, and while they could understand that focus, they expressed the view that some element of comparison with models in other countries would be useful. The Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) who met with the Panel also raised this issue and said that students had requested more of an international perspective. They made the point that while numbers of international students were currently low on the Public Policy programme, the introduction of some international material would be likely to be attractive to international students. The Head of Department observed that there had previously been some international comparative element at undergraduate level, and it had not been popular with students. However, it was acknowledged that this could be re-considered.
- 3.4.5 Undergraduate students and GTAs both commented on the issue of poor levels of attendance and participation particularly at Level 2 and raised the question of whether some revision of tutorial structures could be used to address this.
- 3.4.6 In view of the various issues raised in the course of the review visit, the Review Panel **recommends** that the Department pursue its review of undergraduate provision, initially at Level 2, focussing on curriculum content, progression from Level 1, and tutorial provision.

Delivery of postgraduate programmes

- 3.4.7 The SER highlighted the conference-style delivery of courses on the PGT programmes (whereby courses were delivered in intensive two-day blocks) and the fact that many of the courses were common to more than one programme. The Review Panel was interested to hear student and staff perspectives on how successfully this operated. On the positive side, it was clear that for several of the postgraduate students who met the Panel study would have been impracticable were teaching to be delivered in a more conventional pattern (e.g. Housing Studies Programme students, who were in full-time employment and were granted day-release by their employers; also one student on the Masters in Public Policy said that this pattern of teaching enabled her to have a part-time job on specific days of the week.) The structure was clear to students: they would study a particular topic which was followed shortly by the related tutorial and assessment, and the timetables were published well in advance. The students confirmed that they enjoyed this intensive focus on one topic at a time, though sometimes when the topics were close together the students would be working on more than one at a time. There were several positive comments from students in relation to the fact that classes were shared with students from other programmes, with contrasting disciplinary backgrounds. (see also paragraph 3.6.4)

3.4.8 As acknowledged in the SER, this pattern came with administrative inflexibility, however, so that there could be problems if a block of teaching needed to be re-arranged (e.g. because of staff sickness). Another possible disadvantage, particularly for part-time students, was the potential for long gaps between courses, though none of the students who spoke with the Panel had experienced this problem. Staff were also aware that this mode of delivery was different from that used in other departments with whom they would be merged in the new School. Graduate Teaching Assistants also made the point that sometimes attendance at classes towards the end of the day was poor, possibly because students were at 'saturation point'. Some students confirmed that they found the days very demanding.

3.5 *Student Recruitment*

3.5.1 The Department acknowledged in the SER that as its provision was broad-based and multi-disciplinary, developing a coherent and effective recruitment strategy was challenging. The Department's view was that there was significant potential for growth at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. At undergraduate level there was the issue of potential students simply being unaware of Public Policy and what it would cover. This was relevant for school leavers as well as for students who were already at the University studying on different disciplines. The SER noted that students had reported that Faculty Advisers had not always been well informed about Public Policy courses. The complicated mix of programmes available at postgraduate level also meant that there was some uncertainty about recruitment strategy. There was recognition in the SER that this was an issue requiring significant input of staff time. The very specialised nature of the programmes meant that there were limitations on the assistance that could be provided by the Recruitment and International Office.

3.5.2 The Review Panel was interested to hear students' reflections on why they had come to study in the Department. Many of the undergraduate students spoke about having chosen Public Policy accidentally ('a stab in the dark'), because of not having been aware of the subject area at school, having perhaps tried another subject first or heard about it informally through other students. The postgraduates reported having researched what was available because of pursuing specific career aspirations. Students on the Housing Studies Programme had been alerted to the programme through their employers or through colleagues who had themselves taken the programme. Some had had to wait until funding was available to support them through the programme. Some postgraduate students reported having found the Department website confusing in relation to the application process, though it was also said that when they had spoken to departmental staff they had received clear advice. One student mentioned that she had been disappointed to find that one of the courses advertised last year was not in fact running this year.

3.5.3 The Review Panel's view was that there were elements of the Department's provision that might have a wider appeal outwith the Department, such as the 'Active Citizenship' course. Glasgow itself was very marketable as a city in the Public Policy context. The Real Estate, Planning and Regeneration Programme and the Masters in Public Policy and Management were perceived as potentially more marketable to international students, as opposed to the Housing Studies Programme which was necessarily focussed on the local context. The Head of Department noted that there was scope to deliver more CPD which in turn would raise awareness of the Public Policy programme for school teachers. It was also hoped that the new School structure might lead to the Department's provision gaining a higher profile.

International recruitment

3.5.4 The SER reported on various areas in which the Department was internationalising its provision. The first cohort of students on the new Masters in Public Policy and

Management had commenced their studies in January 2010, composed of civil servants sponsored by the Romanian Government. The Review Panel met one of this group, who was very positive about her experiences at the University. Key staff reported that they had found the group to be very able and hard working. The Panel noted that another new programme, the Masters in International Planning and Urban Policy, was currently undergoing programme approval. This was to be delivered initially in Abu Dhabi with a planned commencement date of September 2011.

- 3.5.5 The SER acknowledged that the Masters in Public Policy, launched in 2005, had not attracted as many international students as had been hoped and the Head of Department noted that the targets had been ambitious. His view was that there were significant potential markets in USA and India, which the Department was keen to pursue.
- 3.5.6 The Department had recently appointed a visiting Professor from the Netherlands and the Head of Department hoped that this broadening of perspective would be beneficial.
- 3.5.7 The Department did not have a large number of students participating in study abroad. Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel expressed an interest in studying abroad but indicated that in some cases their circumstances meant they were unable to be away for a full year, and that if they were able to go for a shorter period this would make it more feasible. The potential for study abroad on the postgraduate programmes was more limited (particularly where the content was largely prescribed through accreditation) though there was the possibility that the proposed Masters in International Planning and Public Policy would offer Glasgow-based postgraduates the opportunity to spend a short period studying in Abu Dhabi. The Panel **recommends** that the Department investigate all possibilities for study abroad by its students, including pre-Honours and for periods of less than a year. It was noted that work was underway in the Faculty to regularise the treatment of marks received from host institutions in relation to work undertaken by Glasgow students.

Recommendation on marketing and recruitment

- 3.5.8 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department continue its development of a marketing and recruitment strategy. The SER noted that programme teams were working on strategies and action plans, and the Panel encourages a departmental overview of this, seeking to draw on the full range of assistance and opportunities available at University level and in the new School and College.

3.6 Student Progression, Retention and Support

Progression

- 3.6.1 Several of the students who met with the Review Panel commented on how they had progressed with Public Policy even though this had not initially been their preferred area of study. This reflected the interesting subject matter and the positive atmosphere in the Department. Undergraduate students told the Panel that the Department had not particularly 'marketed' the choice of Public Policy for Honours but that the necessary information had been made available. The Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) who met with the Panel mentioned the fact that in the past academic members of staff had made presentations to Level 2 students on their current research. The GTAs felt that this acted as a selling point for students considering whether to progress to Honours in the Department. This practice had now been stopped. However key staff spoke about Level 2 case-study based lectures which were seen as a means of making connections with Honours, and exposed students to current research.

Support

- 3.6.2 Undergraduate and postgraduate students who met with the Review Panel spoke warmly about the supportive atmosphere in the Department. Honours and postgraduate students in particular spoke of a strong sense of belonging. Several of the students who met with the Panel mentioned the administrative staff's important contribution to this. Students confirmed that they had no difficulty contacting staff outwith class times and that responses were generally prompt and helpful. PGT students told the Panel that when they had requested additional support in relation to essay writing this was provided. GTAs advised the Panel that they observed 'office hours' when they were available for students to meet with them but that the bulk of the support consisted of e-mail correspondence leading up to the submission of assignments. While this represented a busy workload they reported that it was manageable. The Panel noted that a large number of external teachers were used, particularly on the postgraduate programmes. Postgraduate students were asked whether they were able to contact external lecturers outwith teaching time and they confirmed that this was not a problem: contact was either coordinated through a full-time member of staff or external lecturers made their contact details available and responded to students directly.
- 3.6.3 The GTAs mentioned to the Review Panel that there had been a drop in the number of tutorials offered at Level 2, and commented on not getting to know the students as well as at Level 1.

Diversity of student backgrounds

- 3.6.4 The Review Panel explored with the Department the issue of the distinctiveness of its student profile. At postgraduate level there was a relatively high number of students from non-traditional academic backgrounds, some without first degrees and many who had been away from formal education for a significant period. At postgraduate level many of the courses were common to more than one programme, so classes were often made up of students with a very broad range of disciplinary backgrounds and professional experiences. Staff acknowledged to the Panel that this could be challenging but on the whole they found their students to be highly motivated and enjoyable to teach. In dividing classes into smaller 'break-out' groups, staff deliberately mixed students in order to allow them to experience a broad range of perspectives. Students were aware of this practice and confirmed to the Panel the positive effects of it: they commented on the opportunity to learn from their colleagues and to begin to form their own professional networks. The Head of Department noted that since the inception of the teaching of Public Policy, it had always been the case that courses attracted students from a broad range of backgrounds and that staff were very experienced at managing the challenges that this presented.
- 3.6.5 Key staff explained to the Panel that PGT applicants without a first degree were considered carefully. Applicants for the Housing Studies Programme without recent relevant academic experience were sometimes asked to produce a short piece of written work in order to assist the Department in assessing their suitability for the programme. Once such students were admitted, the Programme Director monitored their progress closely and ensured that they were made aware of available support services. Key staff observed that these students were often highly motivated and they generally performed well.
- 3.6.6 Several of the students – undergraduate and postgraduate – who met with the Review Panel commented on the sympathetic and supportive attitude of departmental staff in relation to their non-traditional backgrounds. They appreciated staff's understanding attitude in relation to family and employment pressures, and one mature undergraduate student spoke about 'being treated like an adult'. Students appeared to have a mature attitude towards keeping staff apprised of such pressures and not requesting help at

the last minute. Graduate Teaching Assistants who met with the Panel felt that it was valuable experience for them to teach groups with mixed backgrounds, and that while students from non-traditional backgrounds sometimes needed more support around submission deadlines, the GTAs found these students to be very committed to their studies.

Social events

- 3.6.7 In addition to the normal range of support services provided by Course Coordinators, Programme Directors and various Faculty and University services, the Department arranged various social events. Undergraduate students told the Review Panel that their impression was that these were not particularly well attended but those who had attended had found them enjoyable and helpful for making contacts in other year groups. Undergraduate students thought that events would be more successful if they were more regular and involved an activity with a topical theme (such as the existing occasional film nights). They felt that events combining some element of study and socialising were the best, such as a reading away-day or weekend. It was noted that there was no student society for Public Policy.
- 3.6.8 Part-time students who met the Review Panel discussed the fact that they were only present at the Department for short periods of time, but said that while they were there they felt they 'belonged' and were supported. Social events could be difficult to fit in alongside work and family commitments. They said that they were aware of the various opportunities to get involved. A lack of social space in the Department meant that postgraduate students tended to use the Fraser Building between classes.

Induction

- 3.6.9 Key staff reinforced the statement in the SER that in recent years they had channelled more resources into the induction process, and that some elements had recently been moved closer to submission of the first assessment in order to optimise their usefulness and relevance, and to avoid overload at the very start of the programme.

Dissertation support

- 3.6.10 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel discussed their experiences of preparing a dissertation. They had found it difficult to choose a topic given the wide range of areas that they could investigate. They reported that the eventual topic chosen was often quite different from that described in the proposal which was assessed for the research methods course. They reported variation in their own experience and that of their colleagues in terms of supervision and, while recognising that supervision needs would vary with time and with the varying nature of the research projects, they expressed a sense of being 'left on their own'. One suggestion was that there should be regular sessions open to all students at which a member of staff would be available to advise on general dissertation issues. The Panel's view was that the range of opinions being expressed was not unusual and that the problems encountered were part of the normal research process.
- 3.6.11 The postgraduate students who met with the Review Panel had found that a number of assignments had clear relevance to the dissertation. They also noted the difficulty of choosing a topic. This comment particularly related to Public Policy where students came from a large number of different disciplines. As with the undergraduate students, there was a range of experiences in relation to supervision and some uncertainty about who to approach for general advice.

Careers/Employability

- 3.6.12 None of the undergraduates who met with the Review Panel (ranging from Level 1 to Honours) appeared to have a clear focus on their careers. They reported that this had been the case when they entered University and had not changed. They were

unaware of any specific input from the University Careers Service. They told the Panel that they knew about the Mahara software but none had used it except at Level 1 in an introductory session on the relevant technology. The comment was made that what was more important than thinking about particular careers was the development of a range of skills and attributes. The students recognised that the placement opportunities made available by the Department could be very valuable in this respect. The Panel noted that graduate employment for the Department was good with a healthy number of students entering careers related to their discipline. The Panel was pleased to note students' comments on graduate attributes but felt that more of a focus on particular careers could be beneficial.

- 3.6.13 There was a marked contrast in the attitude of the PGT students who met with the Review Panel, whose reasons for taking the programmes were much more closely aligned with their careers. Students were appreciative of being alerted to events and seminars outwith the University as well as the careers focus of the programmes themselves. The use of Mahara was actively promoted, and the SER described the focus on PDP being implemented on the Masters in Public Policy and Management. Again the placement opportunities were appreciated by the students, as was the fact that through much of the teaching they were exposed to practitioners in their field. On the Real Estate, Planning and Regeneration programme students had to elect which stream of the programme to follow and the comment was made that staff offered advice in helping the students to assess which route would be best for their own particular career aspirations.
- 3.6.14 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department consider greater engagement with the Careers Service at undergraduate level, and extends to other programmes the good practice in PDP being developed on the Masters in Public Policy and Management.

3.7 The Quality of Learning Opportunities

- 3.7.1 The students who met with the Review Panel expressed satisfaction with the quality of their learning opportunities and their experience as students in the Department. The Panel noted the 95% positive response score in the National Student Survey 2009 in relation to the statement 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'. The Panel **commends** the Department on this achievement.

3.8 Resources for Learning and Teaching

Administrative Support

- 3.8.1 The workload for administrative staff had its own particular demands, such as postgraduate students who were present at the University for isolated but concentrated periods of time, students without the usual academic backgrounds who sometimes needed more guidance and advice, and a complicated suite of postgraduate programmes each with very specialised administrative demands (e.g. timetabling). Some of the administrative staff had been in post for significant periods of time and had built up considerable levels of skill and background knowledge. The Head of Department acknowledged that there was an unusually high ratio of administrative to academic staff in the Department but noted that this had been reduced and would be reduced further with the imminent retirement of one member of staff who would not be replaced.
- 3.8.2 In several of the meetings with staff and students, administrative staff were mentioned as being a first point of contact and a source of invaluable help and support, and it was clear that they performed a very important role in supporting the work of the Department. Key staff and the Head of Department expressed serious concerns about

the implications of the University's restructuring and in particular the implications of any centralisation of administrative staff. The personal interface between administrative staff and students was felt to be a key part of the Department's infrastructure, a view borne out by comments from students and Graduate Teaching Assistants.

External teaching staff

- 3.8.3 The use of external lecturers was an important feature of the Department's teaching, enabling students to learn about specialised fields from current experts and practitioners. This was clearly highly valued by students. There appeared to be no problems in terms of students feeling unsupported outwith classes. (See paragraph 3.6.2) The Review Panel noted that remuneration of external lecturers presented a significant financial burden for the Department.

Workload model

- 3.8.4 The Review Panel noted that the Department's workload model was in its second year of operation and that figures suggested that workload was fairly evenly spread across Department staff. Some issues were still open to debate but overall staff indicated their agreement with the method of calculation adopted. The Head of Department noted that the Department was in discussion with the other departments that would form the new School of Social and Political Sciences regarding integration of the different workload models.

Probationary staff

- 3.8.5 Two members of the Review Panel met with the one member of probationary staff, who reported that the support offered by Departmental colleagues had been good. There had, however, been some difficult issues relating to the status of the probationary period. It had taken some time for a mentor to be appointed but PDR procedures had been followed. The member of staff reported that workload was reasonable. There had been good informal induction into the Department including a lot of contact with the teaching teams. The Head of Department acknowledged that there had been misunderstandings in relation to the member of staff's probation and stated that efforts had been made to resolve the situation. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department take steps to ensure that induction and probation procedures are strictly adhered to for all staff.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

- 3.8.6 Half of the Review Panel met with four Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). They confirmed that they had all attended the statutory training for GTAs and that they were receiving on-going support from the Department in relation to specific aspects of their roles. They participated variously in tutoring and marking on the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Allocation of workload was made in discussion with the individual GTA and all appeared satisfied with this process.
- 3.8.7 The Review Panel was impressed with the positive attitude demonstrated by the GTAs in relation to their involvement in teaching and assessment. They spoke enthusiastically about the value of this experience for their CVs, their growing confidence in their roles, the support received from each other and from other departmental colleagues, and the valuable experience of working with students from a wide range of backgrounds. They had been given the chance to make presentations on their own research to undergraduate students and to departmental colleagues, and were attending conferences and contributing to academic papers. While the GTAs described demanding workloads, they appeared to have a very positive view of their overall 'apprenticeship' experience.
- 3.8.8 The GTAs who tutored on the Level 1 undergraduate programme told the Review Panel that they felt very well supported in their roles and, despite being nervous about

the work in advance, had never felt 'out of their depth'. There were regular monthly meetings for the Level 1 tutors, and they were given clear direction on the expected learning outcomes for the tutorials together with relevant supporting materials. This contrasted with the experience of those tutoring on Level 2 where there was a smaller team of tutors and meetings were held only once a semester; the GTAs expressed the view that they would benefit from more frequent meetings and guidance on tutorials. The GTAs received feedback on their teaching through course evaluations, with the comments being edited by the course coordinator.

- 3.8.9 The GTAs described to the Review Panel their involvement in marking tests, essays and examinations both summatively and formatively. In preparation for marking essays at Level 1 the GTAs were given three sample essays to mark and then a group exercise was held at which their marking was discussed. In preparation for marking assessments they were given answer guidelines. Samples of their marking were forwarded to the Convener for feedback, and where there were found to be discrepancies between their own marks and those of the second marker the piece of work would be discussed with a third marker. One of the GTAs described how for a reflective journal at Honours every script was discussed by the GTA and the first marker and a mark agreed together. The GTAs also told the Panel that where they requested feedback on their marking this was given and was found to be very helpful. The Panel **commends** the level of support provided by departmental staff to GTAs particularly in relation to the marking of assessments.

Student Handbooks

- 3.8.10 The Review Panel found the student handbooks to be very clear. However, two students reported to the Panel particular difficulties they had encountered (one in relation to the payment of Council Tax, and one in relation to options for funding) and the Panel considered that the Department might review whether handbooks could usefully include more general information on the range of University services. It was noted that information on the Students' Representative Council was out of date, but this was in the process of being reviewed by the SRC, and updated information would be provided to all new Schools for 2010-11.

Accommodation

- 3.8.11 In the SER the Department drew attention to problems relating to the current accommodation. The Review Panel was dismayed to learn of the Department's efforts to recruit more students with disabilities being frustrated by the lack of teaching space which was easily accessible for wheelchair users. The long-term future of the Bute Gardens buildings was unknown, and the Dean confirmed to the Review Panel that the current five year Estates plan did not include provision for significant redevelopment though it might be possible to carry out some minor alterations. There was also the possibility of some redevelopment of the Adam Smith building.
- 3.8.12 Undergraduate and postgraduate students who met the Review Panel spoke about the lack of social space in the Department. The Real Estate Planning and Regeneration (REPR) Programme did, however, have its own base room. Bute Gardens did not have janitorial support so administrative staff effectively performed a security function in admitting users to the building.
- 3.8.13 The Graduate Teaching Assistants who met with the Review Panel reported that some of their office space was not ideal, as one of the rooms was used as a thoroughfare and it was impossible to ensure confidentiality of sensitive data. It was noted that this problem could be alleviated by the erection of partitions. The view was also expressed that lighting was poor.
- 3.8.14 One MRes student who did not have a dedicated desk in the Department worked mostly in the Adam Smith building. While this was well equipped with computers,

sometimes what was required was desk space rather than a computer and this could be difficult to find.

- 3.8.15 The Review Panel asked about the use of the REPR baseroom. The students reported that the room was easy to access but it contained only two computers and was not used much socially or for group work. When students had been required to print out items of coursework the printer equipment was not working and most students had had to make alternative arrangements.
- 3.8.16 Key staff acknowledged that the various issues relating to accommodation had not been discussed at departmental level, but there was no unused space in the Department. While it would be desirable to have a dedicated room for the Housing Studies Programme, it was simply impracticable to allocate a room that would be unused for most of the week. Staff noted that while computer provision in the REPR baseroom was limited the room was ideally suited to other activities such as mapwork. It was also noted that some student cohorts utilised the room more than others. While there were clearly limitations in some of the features of departmental accommodation, postgraduate and undergraduate students were generally positive about University facilities such as the spaces available in the library.
- 3.8.17 The conference-style delivery on PGT programmes presented challenges in terms of accommodation. The need to have teaching rooms available for whole days at a time plus groups of break-out rooms available for parts of those days meant that timetabling could be difficult, and there was very little flexibility for re-scheduling. Where break-out rooms were used, having students moving backwards and forwards between different buildings in the course of the days of block teaching was not ideal.
- 3.8.18 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department take an overview of its use of and requirements for accommodation, addressing issues that are under its own control (e.g. establishing privacy of office space for Graduate Teaching Assistants) and presenting to Faculty those issues of work- and social-space that are outwith its control. The Panel further **recommends** that the Faculty prioritise the enhancement of disabled access, and consider other accommodation issues presented by the Department in the context of the imminent restructuring.

4. Maintaining the Standards of Awards

Benchmark statement and other relevant external reference points

- 4.1 The Review Panel noted from the SER that programme specifications were prepared with reference to the QAA Benchmarks for Social Policy and Administration.

Accreditation

- 4.2 Almost all courses were validated by one or more of the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Royal Town Planning Institute. The accreditation process also provided the main vehicle for the consideration of employers' concerns.

External Examiners

- 4.3 The Review Panel found evidence in External Examiners' Reports of positive feedback on student achievement, quality of student work, as well as quality of teaching and assessment feedback. Departmental staff who met with the Panel described Exam Board meetings as a good forum for discussion with External Examiners of specific issues as well as for more general reflection. External Examiners played an active role, which included meeting students. While the Panel saw the merit in this approach, its view was that this should be complemented by annual review at departmental level.

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

Quality Assurance Procedures

- 5.1 In the SER the Department set out the different means of Quality Assuring the Department's provision. There were separate Undergraduate and Postgraduate Teaching Committees, and the Panel heard how the Conveners of these Committees met frequently and shared experiences. They believed that one of their core responsibilities was the dissemination of good practice. Across the PGT programmes much of the teaching was shared so there was naturally a lot of communication between the teams. Staff cited the experience on the Real Estate, Planning and Regeneration Programme where new staff had joined the Department and innovations that they had introduced were shared across the teaching teams. The Review Panel also noted that the Graduate Teaching Assistants spoke about sharing their experiences with each other. In the last academic year changes had been introduced into the Honours programme (e.g. in relation to the use of group work) drawing on practice at PG level.
- 5.2 The point was made by staff that these informal mechanisms operated quite naturally in what was a relatively small Department. However, following the restructuring of the University, when the Department would become part of a much larger School, it would be very important to ensure that QA procedures were robust. The Review Panel's view was that the QA framework was not currently evident from the documentation; there was no formal Department QA Policy.
- 5.3 Generally the Panel found a lack of emphasis on the dissemination of good practice and innovation in teaching. For example there was no on-going work with the Higher Education Academy subject centres. Key staff told the Review Panel about two current research projects, on assessing employability and graduate attributes, that were being supported by the University's Learning and Teaching Development Fund.
- 5.4 Although dissemination of good practice did happen at Department meetings, these meetings had a wide ranging agenda and QA matters did not have a high profile. Key staff agreed that the formal meetings tended not to focus on innovation and felt that more emphasis could be given to this at their annual review meeting.
- 5.5 One area where the dissemination of good practice would have been useful was in the organisation of Levels 1 and 2 of the undergraduate programme. Undergraduate students and Graduate Teaching Assistants told the Review Panel about the very high level of organisation at Level 1, with monthly meetings of the teaching team, which in themselves were useful but also strengthened the team. At Level 2 these meetings were held once a semester and the GTAs felt that this was not enough.

Annual Monitoring

- 5.6 The Review Panel was impressed at the extensive comments provided by students through annual monitoring, and the fact that in some cases course coordinators added their own reflections at the end of the forms. However, the Panel was concerned to learn that the response rate had fallen significantly since the introduction of electronic returns. This emphasised the importance of feeding back to students on the results of the monitoring exercise, so that they would feel that their views were valued. Key staff's view was that 30 questions for course evaluations was too much, and that this was more appropriate for the programme evaluations at the end of the year. Key staff acknowledged that they did not always document QA work throughout the year and that some elements of this could be overlooked when it came to completing annual reports. Undergraduate students who met with the Panel were not clear about whether they had received feedback on the results of course evaluations.

SSLC

- 5.7 The Review Panel explored students' views on the effectiveness of Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs). The undergraduate students who met with the Panel said that they were aware there were class representatives, but they were not always clear who they were. The general view was that SSLCs were not well attended and that not many issues were raised. The SSLC meeting in the first semester, however, was normally very well attended by class representatives. There was an opportunity for each class representative to raise issues at every year level and on every honours course. The students thought that minutes of meetings had been e-mailed to them and that they would be able to find minutes on Moodle. Also, staff sometimes responded on specific issues in lectures. One undergraduate student, who was a class representative, said that he had not been able to attend the SSLC because of clashes with another class but said that if he had any issues that he wished to raise he would approach the Programme Coordinator directly. Another representative told the Panel that he always invited colleagues to suggest issues to raise at the SSLC and there was little or no response. The general view of students was that issues raised by them would be dealt with by staff but this might be done through a number of different channels.
- 5.8 The Review Panel noted that there were issues that recurred frequently at SSLCs (e.g. the request for lecture notes to be made available on Moodle in advance of lectures). Currently there were no student representatives on the Teaching Committees and the Panel **recommends** that the Department invite student membership in order to strengthen the feedback loop on teaching issues. The Head of Department confirmed that he was in favour of such a move. SSLCs did not appear on the Department's organisation chart. It was not clear to the Panel how issues arising at SSLCs would be fed through to departmental committees. Key staff advised the Panel that feedback from SSLCs was always on the Agenda of the Teaching Committees.
- 5.9 Postgraduate students on the Housing Studies Programme explained to the Review Panel that there was no SSLC as the number of students was small. On the HSP the Programme Director had fed back to the students on changes being made to the Programme (e.g. on induction) in response to previous student feedback. There was some uncertainty amongst other postgraduate students about student reps, but all said that they could always approach a member of staff if there was an issue of concern. On the Real Estate, Planning and Regeneration Programme there was a forum on Moodle through which students could raise issues and the responses would be recorded.

Recommendation on QA

- 5.10 The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department:
- Formalise departmental QA procedures, with an emphasis on feedback to students, external examiners and validating bodies, and on effective communication between all departmental staff on QA issues
 - Set out a systematic approach to the development and dissemination of good practice in Learning and Teaching
- Both of these developments to be informed by the Department's Learning and Teaching Strategy (see paragraph 2.2).

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

Key Strengths

- The provision of high quality engaging teaching, embedded in real world policy and practice, leading to well qualified, employable graduates
- The recent expansion in postgraduate taught programmes, founded on research strength and active links with a range of professional, voluntary and governmental agencies
- The accessibility of the Department's programmes to students from a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, and the support provided by staff to this diverse group
- The conscious effort made by the Department to harness the breadth of these backgrounds and experiences to enhance students' collective learning experience and break down professional boundaries
- The support provided to Graduate Teaching Assistants and the Department's integration of them into a broad range of the Department's activities
- Positive staff-student relationships, both academic and administrative staff being reported to be accessible, supportive and responsive to students' individual circumstances
- Collegiality of Department staff

Areas to be improved or enhanced

- Articulation of a Learning and Teaching Strategy
- Formalisation of QA procedures and greater emphasis on innovation and dissemination of best practice
- Engagement with the issue of timing of feedback on assessments
- Programme Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes, to include reflection of all good practice currently being delivered
- Range of non-traditional assessments
- Recruitment and Marketing Strategy
- Departmental accommodation, particularly in relation to disabled students

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The Review Panel commends the Department on its constructive engagement with the DPTLA process, its open and reflective approach to the SER and the positive attitudes displayed by staff and students in discussions with the Panel during the review visit. A number of recommendations have been made in the body of the report, many of which concern areas that the Department itself highlighted for further development prior to the review or in the SER.

Recommendations

The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer. They are ranked in order of priority.

Recommendation 1

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department develop an explicit Learning and Teaching Strategy. This should include the articulation of a subject-specific philosophy for education in Urban Studies and provide a framework and timetable for the on-going development of the Department's work.

The Strategy should, among other things:

- Inform the review of Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes of programmes and courses
- Formalise departmental QA procedures, with an emphasis on feedback to students, external examiners and validating bodies, and on effective communication between all departmental staff on QA issues
- Set out a systematic approach to the development and dissemination of good practice in Learning and Teaching

[paragraphs 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 5.10]

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

Recommendation 2

The Panel **recommends** that the Department investigate, through dialogue with students, the NSS indicator on the lack of promptness of assessment feedback, and consider assessment scheduling, manage student expectations appropriately or take whatever other action is indicated by the results of that investigation.

[paragraph 3.3.10]

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

Recommendation 3

The Panel **recommends** that the Department review its marking practices and consider the replacement of double marking with a robust moderation process which gives particular attention to borderlines at Levels 1 and 2, and the use of double rather than blind double marking of honours in-course assignments.

[paragraph 3.3.14]

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

Recommendation 4

The Panel **recommends** that the Department pursue its review of undergraduate provision, initially at Level 2, focussing on curriculum content, progression from Level 1, and tutorial provision.

[paragraph 3.4.6]

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

Recommendation 5

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department continue its development of a marketing and recruitment strategy. The SER noted that programme teams were working on strategies and action plans, and the Panel encourages a departmental

overview of this, seeking to draw on the full range of assistance and opportunities available at University level and in the new School and College.

[paragraph 3.5.8]

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

Recommendation 6

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department continue extending the range of non-traditional methods of assessment within the context of developing an assessment strategy that is consistent with the revisions made to ILOs.

[paragraph 3.3.4]

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

Recommendation 7

The Panel **recommends** that the Department develop a rationale for dealing with plagiarism which encompasses its approach to using Turnitin.

[paragraph 3.3.15]

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

Recommendation 8

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department invite student membership of Department Teaching Committees.

[paragraph 5.8]

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

Recommendation 9

The Panel **recommends** that the Department investigate all possibilities for overseas study by its students, including pre-Honours and for periods of less than a year.

[paragraph 3.5.7]

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

Recommendation 10

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department take steps to ensure that induction and probation procedures are strictly adhered to for all staff.

[paragraph 3.8.5]

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

Recommendation 11

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department take an overview of its use of and requirements for accommodation, addressing issues that are under its own control (e.g. establishing privacy of office space for Graduate Teaching Assistants) and presenting to Faculty those issues of work- and social-space that are outwith its

control. The Panel further **recommends** that the Faculty prioritise the enhancement of disabled access, and consider other accommodation issues presented by the Department in the context of the imminent restructuring.

[paragraph 3.8.18]

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

Recommendation 12

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department consider greater engagement with the Careers Service at undergraduate level, and extends to other programmes the good practice in PDP being developed on the Masters in Public Policy and Management.

[paragraph 3.6.14]

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