

SCOTTISH AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

Follow-up Report of the Review of Programmes of the Horticulture Subject Group 2011

Meeting Held at SAC Edinburgh on 25th April 2012

Proposal for Validation of BSc/BSc (Hons) Garden and Greenspace Design

1 Background

As part of the Internal Subject Review of SAC Horticulture Programmes held in May/June 2011, the programme team brought forward a proposal for the validation of a BSc/BSc (Hons) in Garden Design.

SAC currently offers HNC and HND awards in Garden Design, validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), at its Ayr and Edinburgh campuses. The proposal was for a BSc/BSc (Hons) degree in Garden Design, which would use the HN awards as Years 1 and 2, to be validated by the University of Glasgow and available at SAC's Edinburgh campus.

Having scrutinised the validation document and interviewed the programme development team, lead by programme leader Dr Margaret Norton, and existing HNC/D students, the review panel concluded that:

“...the development of the degree programme would benefit greatly from further work. In particular, there was a need to clarify aspects that define:

- the essential nature of the degree, including the science content of Years 3 and 4 (the BSc/BA question),*
- justification for an emphasis on an international experience,*
- a vision for the degree that could be encapsulated in a ‘unique selling point’.*

This would help not only to strengthen the curriculum and the learning experience but also to create a buoyant and successful new degree.

The panel recommended that as part of this further work, the development team should:

- ensure that the document clarified further the justification for the award, particularly in relation to existing similar programmes elsewhere and industry demand, in order to establish its unique selling point.*
- clarify the fundamental direction of the programme, given that the proposal was for a BSc degree, despite there being no core modules in science in Years 3 and 4;*
- seek to involve individuals from HEIs offering similar, non-competing programmes as ‘critical friends’ in the development process;*
- clarify the features of the programme that would justify claims for its having an international dimension, and consider the potential benefits of involvement of RBGE;*
- consider the potential benefits of including a period of work placement in the programme;*

- *consider aspects of the curriculum that might be given greater emphasis, especially the concept of people and place; and the importance of environmentally sustainable practices;*
- *consider separating the provision of tuition for the 'leisure/hobby' student from that serving the needs of mainstream students in order to ensure a strong group identity for the latter.*

The team was invited to bring a revised proposal for validation in ... 2012."

The panel's full report from June 2011 is included as Appendix 1.

The panel reconvened in April 2012 to consider amended proposals from the programme team.

2 Review Panel

David McKenzie: Vice-Principal Learning, SAC [Convener].

Dr Robert Aitken: Head of the School of Life Sciences, College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences, University of Glasgow.

Stan Green: Managing Director, Growforth Limited.

Michael Westley: Professional Landscape Architect and Associate Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture, Design & Environment, University of Plymouth

Linda Whillans: Environmental and Social Sciences Teaching Group Manager, SAC

Dr Chris Smith: Academic Development Group Manger, SAC [Reporter]

The original subject review panel in 2011 included a student representative; David Hurst who was then studying Year 3 of BSc Agriculture at SAC Edinburgh. David chose to graduate from SAC in July 2011 and was no longer available for the panel. Since SAC's procedures for programme validations do not require a student panel member (in contrast to those for Internal Subject Review). It was the view of the convener that it was not necessary to appoint a replacement student panel member. In 2011 the panel's reporter was Prof. Andrew Walker, Academic Services Manager who retired in July 2011 and was replaced in his role by Dr Chris Smith.

3 Consideration of Revised Proposals

The development team submitted a detailed report which addressed the points raised by the panel in 2011, and presented revised proposals for the format and structure for years 3 and 4 of a new degree programme which they proposed should now be titled Garden and Greenspace Design. Following consideration of the document the review team met with the development team to discuss their proposals.

3.1 Consultation with 'Critical Friends'

In the past year members of the development team had consulted with a number of relevant individuals with expertise in the teaching of garden and landscape design: Professor James Hitchmough (University of Sheffield), Steven Terry (Writtle College), Ian Simkins (Experiemics Ltd, also tutor at Sheffield University), Andrew Fisher Tomlin (Director of London College of Garden Design), Rebecca Govier (Green Edge Garden Design), Anna Eyres (Merrist Wood College). Members of the development team also visited the University of Sheffield and Writtle College as part of the consultation.

Feedback from these consultations was reported to be very constructive and supportive of the general structure and vision of the proposed programme. The consistent view was that the content of the programme covered the fundamental aspects of garden design, that the science content was higher than for many other UK garden design programmes, that the

programme strongly embedded emphasis on functionality, sustainability and maintenance aspects of gardens and greenspace and thereby discriminated the proposed programme from potential competitors offered elsewhere in the UK.

3.2 Demand for Programme

The team had done further work in the past year to evaluate the demand for the programme. The Society of Garden Designers had confirmed their support for the programme and higher level qualifications for garden design in order to increase professional standards; their evidence suggested that demand for degree programmes was increasing.

There had been no further competing programmes introduced in the UK in the past year. The programme would be the only degree programme in Scotland with the closest similar programme being delivered by Leeds Metropolitan University.

Existing SAC HNC/D students had been consulted on the revised proposals and were now happy with the proposed title.

3.3 Science Content and BSc Title

The team explained that they had increased the science content of the programme in a number of ways, including: addition of the module *Research Skill and Data Analysis* to the core in Year 3 to better prepare students for their honour's project work; in year 3 the module *Environmental Science for Garden and Greenspace Design* had been changed to reflect a stronger scientific approach; addition of the analytically based module *Garden and Open Space Management* to the core in Year 4; limiting the list of elective modules in Years 3 and 4 to provide a stronger emphasis on science-based topics.

The team showed that of similar programmes delivered elsewhere in the UK, 5 were awarded as BSc and 3 as BA. A comparison of the module content of these programmes had been compared and demonstrated that the proposed SAC programme was the strongest in terms of its science content whilst providing a thorough coverage of key topics suggested by the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement.

Following debate with the team, the panel reached the view that the changes described above had been made at the expense of providing some students with the opportunity to further develop their higher level business and financial skills and knowledge in the later years of the programme. The panel accepted that there was strong emphasis on these subjects embedded in many modules within the programme but felt that the opportunity for specialist teaching could be provided.

3.4 Vision and 'Unique Selling Points'

The team demonstrated that they had thoroughly considered the ideas and issues proposed by the panel in 2011. They have included revised and additional emphasis on greenspace design and management, for example the module *Garden and Open Space Management* had been moved to the core in Year 4, which builds on the core modules *Landscape Management and Maintenance* and *Landscape Horticulture* in Years 3 and 4 respectively. They emphasised that in addition the embedding of maintenance, sustainability and the functionality of designs throughout the curriculum is a key ethos of the programme – building on delivery in the existing HNC/D.

They emphasised that the programme included consideration of the design of small public designed landscapes as well as domestic gardens, and this has now been reflected in the title. The team reassured the panel that the importance of environmental issues and sustainability was appropriately included within the curriculum.

The importance of the relationship between people and place, with particular reference to human health and wellbeing at individual and community level as suggested by the panel, has been further developed. It is to be introduced more thoroughly in Year 2. Project work throughout the programme will include a strong thread of community designs building on

experience gained and contacts developed in the existing HNC/D delivery. The module *Environmental Psychology, Social Factors and Design* will extend this thread to the Honours year.

The team acknowledged the panel's view from 2011 that the programme's international credentials were over-emphasised. This aspect of the programme content will be downgraded in its promotion and description. However, the team were keen that international considerations would be maintained including the modules *International Design Project* and *World Climatic Zones and Ornamental Plants* in Year 3 and aspects of *Environmental Science for Garden and Greenspace Design* in Year 4. The team explained the ongoing work to develop and build international links, experience and contacts and the panel were supportive of these developments.

As suggested by the panel, discussions had been held with colleagues at The Royal Botanic Gardens about possible further involvement in the programme but RBGE had not shown particular interest.

The panel were satisfied with the changes proposed and commended and supported the team's revised vision for the programme:

- To expand and broaden students' horizons beyond traditional garden design.
- To enable students to contribute to creating sustainable and well designed landscapes to improve the environment and for the benefit of human health.
- To equip students to tackle the design of public, private and corporate spaces in the UK and internationally.
- To produce garden designers with a strong plant knowledge.

3.5 Work Placement

Students had noted in 2011 that they would welcome the opportunity to undertake a work placement and the panel recommended that the team consider this, given its value in promoting students' employability. The team proposed that in future, students will be able to take a work placement module in year 1, and students will be expected to undertake further work experience prior to taking the *Professional Practice* module in Year 4. Examples of work placements taken in year 1 might include garden centres, nurseries, National Trust gardens, local authorities. In Year 4, students would work with garden designers, landscape managers or landscape architects in a more professional setting.

3.6 Separation of Leisure and Professional Markets

The team explained that the majority of existing students at HNC/D level, particularly at the Edinburgh campus - where the degree would be delivered - were committed to a career in Garden Design. This was likely to be strengthened when better qualified degree enrolments were included. The future provision for HNC/D including the leisure market would be reviewed in light of opportunities that might soon be available through potential merger of SAC with the Scotland's three specialist land-based FE colleges. The panel were content with this approach.

4 Conclusions

The panel agreed to recommend to the Learning Division Management Team of SAC and the Academic Standards Committee of the University of Glasgow that the programme should be validated as an award of the University of Glasgow for six years from session 2012/13.

The panel were satisfied that the development team had thoroughly considered the recommendations they had been set in 2011 and congratulated the team on the work they had done to consider and address the recommended actions. They considered that the discussions with 'critical friends' had been particularly helpful, and provided further

reassurance that the content and direction of the programme was the right one. The panel commended the team on the thoroughness of the paperwork provided and their robust engagement in discussions with panel members.

The panel made the following **advisory recommendations** which they considered would further enhance the programme:

- That suitable business and finance electives with no restrictive pre-requisites be included in Years 3 and 4 of the programme in consultation with the programme leader for Rural Business Management;
- That where relevant, module descriptors should be amended to detail the financial and business management elements embedded within them;
- That the descriptor for the Year 4 module *Advanced Design Solutions* should be revised to better reflect the emphasis on landscape detailing and the development of technical competence in the construction of landscapes.

The panel also **strongly encouraged** the team to:

- Ensure that members of the teaching team be afforded the opportunity to develop relevant lines of scholarship to support their teaching;
- Fully utilise the undoubted expertise that already existed within the teaching team to develop a website, linked to the on-line SAC undergraduate prospectus, to promote the programme.

Appendix 1

SCOTTISH AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE

REPORT OF THE REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES IN THE HORTICULTURE SUBJECT GROUP HELD AT SAC EDINBURGH ON 31ST MAY – 1ST JUNE 2011:

Proposal for validation of BSc/BSc(Hons) Garden Design

Review Panel

David McKenzie	Vice-Principal Learning, SAC [Convener]
Dr Robert Aitken	Head of the School of Life Sciences College of Medical, Veterinary and Life Sciences University of Glasgow
Stan Green	Managing Director Growforth Limited
David Hurst	Student Year 3 BSc Agriculture, SAC Edinburgh
Prof Andrew Walker	Academic Services Manager, SAC [Reporter]
Michael Westley	Professional Landscape Architect and Associate Senior Lecturer School of Architecture, Design & Environment University of Plymouth
Linda Whillans	Environmental and Social Sciences Teaching Group Manager, SAC

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This validation proposal was considered as part of a review of SAC's Horticulture suite of programmes.
- 1.2 SAC currently offers HNC and HND awards in Garden Design, validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The proposal is for a BSc/BSc(Hons) degree in Garden Design, which would use the HN awards as Years 1 and 2, to be validated by the University of Glasgow and available at SAC's Edinburgh campus.

The HN awards are offered at SAC's Edinburgh and Ayr campuses. They also ran at Aberdeen from 2006, but low numbers of students made that provision unsustainable. No new enrolments will be accepted at Aberdeen for 2011-12, although existing part-time students will complete their studies during that year.

- 1.3 The panel was provided with a detailed validation document, which explained

the rationale for the programme, the structure and content of the curriculum and provided full module descriptors. The panel discussed the proposal with the programme development team and with a group of students currently studying the HN awards. Details are provided as Appendix 1. Inevitably, topics were discussed at more than one meeting: the report is therefore structured by topic rather than as an account of the separate meetings.

1.4 The numbers of FTEs for the academic year 2010-11 are shown below:

Student numbers (FTEs) for academic year 2010-11

	Aberdeen	Ayr	Edinburgh	Total
Garden Design Year 1	6.5	10.5	11.5	28.5
Garden Design Year 2		1	2	3
Total				31.5

2. Discussions with the development team and students

2.1 The demand for a degree programme

The validation document presented evidence of industry demand for such a programme in the form of summaries of published reports on employment opportunities and skills shortages. Career prospects in all sectors of Horticulture were currently good. Garden designers in the UK were often self-employed or employed by local authorities, garden centres or landscape consortia as designers of small scale public open space or large gardens, where strong plant knowledge and attention to detail in design were valued. There were no competing programmes in Scotland, but seven universities and colleges offering Garden Design degrees in England, the nearest geographically being at Leeds. There was little competition outside the UK.

Current HN Garden Design students were asked about their interest in a degree and their views on the proposed curriculum through questionnaires and group discussions. They were highly satisfied with the HND programme and felt that the core modules in the degree would meet their needs. As might be expected, they differed in their preferences for elective modules, but none of the modules was considered inappropriate. Current students and recent HND graduates would be keen to progress to a degree. The students who met the panel confirmed these views, noting that a degree would have world currency and give the opportunity to increase the breadth and depth of their knowledge, particularly of plants. They noted also that they would welcome the opportunity to do a work placement; the panel **recommended** that the team consider this, given its value in promoting students' employability.

The validation document noted that the HND was currently the highest available qualification in Garden Design in Scotland. The proposed degree had been designed with a strong international content and would be the only one in the UK (and almost certainly in the world) with such a focus. During the past 18 months eight potential applicants had expressed an interest in the degree at open days. Current students and some who had recently qualified with the HND were keen to progress to the proposed degree. Over the last 20 months, email enquiries had been received from 26 potential applicants, 20 of these from mainland Europe. It was felt that overseas students would not come for a

sub-degree qualification, but that a Garden Design degree offered in a cosmopolitan city like Edinburgh would have considerable attraction.

The panel was concerned at the comparatively low numbers of students in Year 1, given that there would inevitably be reductions in numbers at each successive year. There was also very poor progression from Year 1 to Year 2. The team pointed out that the apparent poor progression was in part due to the figures for Year 1 including students who had enrolled specifically for the HNC with no intention of progressing. Higher numbers might be expected in Year 1 if a degree were available as this would be a more attractive prospect, particularly for students from outside the UK.

The team recognised that it was difficult to have any certainty about the numbers that might be enrolled, but cited experience with the Horticulture with Plantsmanship programme, on which acceptable numbers had been recruited after the degree had been introduced. The students who met the panel suggested that students dropped out for a number of reasons, including the workload, a lack of understanding about the nature of a Garden Design qualification and the range of topics within it, and the complications of other commitments, especially for mature students. They agreed that the degree option would increase the number of younger applicants with more commitment and more realistic initial expectations.

The panel acknowledged that the degree would be more attractive to potential applicants, but felt that the current numbers and degree of interest were insufficient to give confidence in there being viable cohorts in each year. It was necessary to define more clearly the features of the proposed programme that would set it apart from other similar programmes and thereby increase its attractiveness to potential applicants. The panel therefore **recommended** that the team clarified further the justification for the award, particularly in relation to existing similar programmes elsewhere and industry demand, in order to establish its unique selling point.

In particular, the panel considered that the emphasis placed on the programme's international credentials was not justified, despite there being a number of modules that were explicitly 'international' (see 2.3). For example, would the international content of the programme meet the expectations of overseas students who would want to return to their home countries to practice? And was there sufficient staff expertise for tuition in the design of gardens for arid climates? The team explained that it was the intention to enrich the learning experience with invited expert speakers. The panel supported this approach, but noted that the involvement of suitable experts would be central to justifying claims for an international focus, and that it should be more thoroughly investigated and costed. The panel wondered whether use could be made of the international expertise of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, particularly as some of the students said that they were surprised when they found that RBGE staff were not involved. The panel therefore **recommended** that the team clarify the features of the programme that would justify claims for its having an international dimension, and consider the potential benefits of the involvement of RBGE.

The panel felt that it was important for the student cohorts to establish a strong group identity and cohesiveness, such that progression from Year 1 to Honours was the norm. The panel therefore **recommended** that the team consider separating the provision of tuition for the 'leisure/hobby' student from that

serving the needs of mainstream students in order to ensure the desired group identity. The introduction of an 'SAC Diploma in Garden Design' might be appropriate for the leisure/hobby market.

2.2 Financial viability

The validation document detailed the additional staff and learning resources that would be required, amounting to £28,000 in start-up costs, £21,500 in annual costs, and additional input in the form of a part-time lecturer and invited specialist speakers. Considerable joint teaching between the related programmes of Garden Design, Horticulture and Horticulture with Plantsmanship, and with other programme areas, helps to maintain the financial viability of a programme despite relatively low student numbers on individual programmes.

2.3 The degree title

The team confirmed that the programme was aimed at both small designed landscapes (mostly public spaces) as well as private gardens, and the title 'Garden Design' was therefore a compromise in that a more accurate title would be unwieldy. Promotional material would explain the full scope of the programme. The panel agreed with this decision. However, of more concern was the use of 'BSc' for a programme structure in which all the science modules in Years 3 and 4 were electives, thereby permitting students to avoid science in these years. The panel acknowledged that there was a significant amount of science in Years 1 and 2, that the Honours Project might well be science-based and that other modules would help students to develop analytical thinking. However, the 'BSc' title meant that all students on the programme should study a sufficient amount of science in Years 3 and 4. The panel therefore **recommended** that the team clarify the fundamental direction of the programme, given that the proposal was for a BSc degree, despite there currently being no core modules in science in Years 3 and 4. The proposed module content might make a BA more appropriate.

2.4 The curriculum

The validation document noted that the proposed curriculum had taken account of the QAA Benchmark Statement for Landscape Architecture (which includes Garden Design), and the guidelines produced by the Society of Garden Designers. Specific modules had been included in Year 3 to give an international dimension, reinforced in Year 4 by the *International Design Project* and the *Professional Practice & Project Management* module, which would address working overseas. There would be a focus on plants and the science behind horticultural practices.

The panel noted that *Garden and Open Space Management* was not a core module, despite the crucial importance of managing a designed landscape in a sustainable way. The team explained that although the programme was aimed at both small designed landscapes and private gardens, the emphasis in the module on the production of management plans for large scale projects meant that it was not necessarily appropriate for all Garden Design students. Furthermore, maintenance aspects were embedded in all the Design modules.

The panel recognised the value of this approach but emphasised the increasing need to consider the ways in which the management of designed

landscapes was affected by external drivers, such as climate change and reductions in funding for maintenance. The students also raised the importance of environmental issues, such as those to do with the use of peat and with the origins of the stone used for landscaping. There was, in fact, no core module dealing specifically with the need for garden design activities to be conducted in an environmentally sustainable way. The panel **recommended** that the team consider including such a module, or alternatively show explicitly how this aspect was developed in context within existing core modules.

The panel asked whether it was realistic to include modules in Year 4 that did not have a grounding in earlier years: *Waste Reduction & Recycling* and *Environmental Economics* were examples. The team explained that experience to date showed that the students had performed very well in these modules, possibly because they developed their interests at an early stage and could therefore be guided effectively over their choice of electives.

Research Skills & Data Analysis was an elective module in Year 3, but if the default end point was Honours should it not be core? The team explained the importance of this module for the Honours Project, noting that its position in Year 3 ensured that students were adequately prepared from the start of Year 4. Again, careful guidance would ensure that students intending to continue to Year 4 would all take this module. Reinforcement of the appropriate skills came from the Honours support programme.

The panel emphasised the importance of the relationship between people and place in the context of gardens and designed landscapes, with particular reference to human health and well-being, at individual and community level. This was covered to some extent in *Environmental Psychology, Social Factors and Design*, but the panel **recommended** that the team consider giving it greater emphasis. The students recognised the potential therapeutic value of plants and gardens and greatly valued the experience of designing hospital gardens as part of their work in Year 2.

2.5 Critical friends

The panel **recommended** that, in the further development of the proposal, the team should seek advice from individuals in other institutions that offered similar programmes. In this way, the team would benefit from testing their ideas against 'critical friends'.

3. Conclusion and summary

The existing HN awards in Garden Design were clearly serving a need in that students found them rewarding from an educational and vocational point of view and there was a good record of appropriate employment. There was considerable added value in the form of visits, study tours, success in show garden competitions and other extra-curricular activities, including the opportunity to attend meetings of the Society of Garden Designers, which were hosted at SAC Edinburgh. SAC graduates were now office-bearers in the Society. Resources were good and improving. Current students were enthusiastic and appreciative of the learning experience. The proposed degree in Garden Design was therefore building on strong foundations and the panel supported the team in its ambitions.

However, the panel felt that the development of the degree programme would

benefit greatly from further work. In particular, there was a need to clarify aspects that define the essential nature of the degree, including the science content of Years 3 and 4 (the BSc/BA question), justification for an emphasis on an international experience, and a vision for the degree that could be encapsulated in a 'unique selling point'. This would help not only to strengthen the curriculum and the learning experience but also to create a buoyant and successful new degree.

The panel recommended that as part of this further work, the development team should:

- ensure that the document clarified further the justification for the award, particularly in relation to existing similar programmes elsewhere and industry demand, in order to establish its unique selling point.
- clarify the fundamental direction of the programme, given that the proposal was for a BSc degree, despite there being no core modules in science in Years 3 and 4;
- seek to involve individuals from HEIs offering similar, non-competing programmes as 'critical friends' in the development process;
- clarify the features of the programme that would justify claims for its having an international dimension, and consider the potential benefits of involvement of RBGE;
- consider the potential benefits of including a period of work placement in the programme;
- consider aspects of the curriculum that might be given greater emphasis, especially the concept of people and place; and the importance of environmentally sustainable practices;
- consider separating the provision of tuition for the 'leisure/hobby' student from that serving the needs of mainstream students in order to ensure a strong group identity for the latter.

The team was invited to bring a revised proposal for validation in February/ March 2012.