

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Thursday 21 May 2015

**Periodic Subject Review: Responses to the Recommendations
Arising from the Review of Theology and Religious Studies held on
6 March 2014**

Mrs Catherine Omand, Senate Office

Conclusions

The Review Panel was impressed by the spirit and enthusiasm of staff and students and the strong mutual respect in building the subject area's dual approach to theology and religious studies. It commends the strong culture of co-teaching and interdisciplinarity within the subject, as well as its breadth of provision. The Panel also noted: the good range of assessment tools; variety of teaching methods and initiatives such as Honours taster day and job shadowing for GTAs. However, the Review Panel identified some area of weakness which are addressed in the Recommendations below. 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.

Response from Subject Area

The draft TRS PSR report was released in May 2014, and was considered at the TRS Away Day in June. The final report was distributed on 27 June 2014, and a summary report sent on 18 September 2014. Its recommendations have been carefully considered at subject area meetings during the course of the 2014/15 and TRS has sought to respond to all of them as noted below.

Please note, however, that the incoming Head of Subject, Charlotte Methuen, has suffered two significant bereavements in the past nine months, with the deaths of her father on 9 July 2014 and of a close friend and research collaborator on 19 January 2015, and that this did have an impact on planning processes within TRS.

Recommendation 1:

The Panel recommends that TRS engage effectively with University strategies, strategic priorities and University wide initiatives ensuring staff have a strong understanding of University and subject priorities so that they can effectively implement them in their teaching. *[paragraph 2.1.3]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Subject and Head of School***

Response:

Through its Away Day in June 2014, subject meetings (some of which have been attended by the Head of School), and engagement with School, College level, and University consultation processes, TRS has engaged with the School's process of strategic planning and the process of drafting the University's new strategic plan. TRS has also undertaken an internal process of reflection on the subject area's strategic priorities. The subject area meeting on 29 April 2015 will be focussed on a research and impact mapping exercise which is intended to reveal synergies across the subject area's research and to help members of staff see how these accord with the strategic priorities of the school, college and university. TRS in Glasgow was represented at the national REF review meeting in Edinburgh and is in the process of undertaking a review of its own REF submission.

Recommendation 2:

The Panel recommends that the subject reflects on the distinctive nature and synergies of its dual, cohesive approach to theology and world-religious studies in articulating an explicitly international curriculum, for example in their programme offerings and their external marketing. [paragraph 3.4.2]

*For the attention of: **Head of Subject and Head of School**
For information: Director Recruitment & International Office*

Response:

This point formed an important focus at the TRS Away Day in June 2014. As a result, the level 2 teaching provision has been revised to draw on expertise across the subject area: a new level 2 course, "Religion, Culture, and Controversy" will be offered in semester 1, and the successfully reorganised course "Mysticism and Spirituality" in semester 2. TRS is currently engaged in a revision of honours provision, moving from 30-credit to 20-credit courses in line with the standardisation of Honours provision across the College of Arts. The current Masters course in Theology, Religion and Culture has been renamed Religion, Literature and Culture to show the focus on hermeneutics and to highlight the centrality of hermeneutical question in both theology and the study of world religions.

Recommendation 3:

The Panel recommends the subject builds on the inherent interdisciplinary nature of theology and religious studies and proactively builds stronger interdisciplinary links across the University through joint courses, joint teaching and joint programmes. [paragraph 2.1.1]

*For the attention of: **Head of Subject and Head of School**
For information: Dean (Learning and Teaching)*

Response:

The possibility of cross subject and cross school teaching is one factor which has driven the standardisation of Honours courses at 20 credits across the College of Arts. This has already borne fruit in the form of a new 20-credit course on existentialism, to be taught jointly by George Pattison (TRS) and Ramona Fotiade (French). Teaching of Asian Religions at level 1 draws on the expertise of Leon Robinson (Education) and Victoria Harrison (Philosophy). Victoria Gunn (Medieval History/learning and teaching) made an important contribution to level 2 teaching and the DPT until she left for the Glasgow School of Art. The Peace-Building strand in the new Masters Programme in Values-Based Practice is expected to draw students from community education programmes, and the planned new PGT programme in Political Islam will also feature interdisciplinary engagement. TRS staff share in teaching on the masters degree in Modernities within English Literature, and work closely with Scottish History, not least through the Scottish Religious Cultures Network inaugurated in March 2014.

Recommendation 4:

The Panel **recommends** TRS review the variability reported by students, including the level of engagement with Moodle in each course and standard approaches to referencing, to ensure high standards and high-levels of satisfaction in some areas are replicated across all provision. [paragraph 3.7.1]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Recommendation 12:

In its meeting with the Panel a number of students commented very favourably on a guide called 'Academic Study Skills' which covers a range of topics including: making lecture notes; correctly referencing work; and plagiarism. Students who met the Panel expressed confusion at the agreed approach to referencing within the subject. The Panel consider that there could be value in identifying and publicising through the Academic Study Skills Guide a single, agreed approach to referencing. The Panel **commends** this guidance for students and **recommends** it be made available to all students within the subject with updated guidance on referencing. [paragraph 5.1.2]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

These two recommendations are taken together, since they are closely related. Student feedback questionnaires have been revised to include a specific question on Moodle; responses to this question have been reviewed. Staff have been asked to share examples of good practice, and when problems with Moodles have been identified, they have been raised with individual members of staff. The "Academic Study Skills" guide, together with guidelines about referencing, have been uploaded to the TRS undergraduate Moodle, but usage statistics suggest that these have not been much consulted. Many TRS staff include guidelines for referencing on their course Moodles, but again the evidence suggests that these are not much used. There was some discussion about referencing at the most recent staff-student liaison committee. The challenge of conveying one standard to students is exacerbated by the fact that conventions vary considerably across the individual areas within TRS. In discussions and in essay feedback, TRS staff have been asked to encourage students to adopt one method of referencing and to use it consistently, and to point students to the style guide available on the UG Moodle and/or to the style guide available on the course Moodle. The School is considering how generic study-skills courses, e.g. the EASEL programme in English Language, might be more widely shared

Recommendation 5:

The Panel recommends TRS develop innovative ways of encouraging internationalisation of the student experience including increasing opportunities for outward learning experiences for example through shorter experiences such as dissertation research visits and restructuring honours courses structure to facilitate longer exchanges. The Subject should consult Recruitment and International Office and the Dean of International Mobility in revising their approach to student mobility. [paragraph 3.6.3]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

For information: Recruitment and International Office, Dean of International Mobility

Response:

Through the Erasmus and Study Abroad Coordinator, Charlotte Methuen (also now Head of Subject for TRS), TRS has engaged with the consultations on student international mobility set up by Jim Murdoch. TRS is currently exploring a range of possibilities for closer links with Mainz (through one of the proposed Erasmus hubs), Sophia University in Japan, and Stellenbosch and University of Cape Town in South Africa.

In the opening lectures at level 2, as part of the careers presentation, a strong emphasis was laid on the value of study abroad experience for future careers perspectives. In line with the experience across the college, applications for study abroad and Erasmus in 2015/16 rose significantly in TRS. Five students (four joint honours, one single honours) will be studying

abroad (one in Chile, one in the USA, two in Canada and one in Germany). This is up from none in 2014-15 and three (one single, two joint) in 2013-14 (one USA, one Canada, one Czech Republic). A further student applied for 2015-16 and was provisionally accepted, but has not achieved the necessary grades.

The revision of honours courses to one-semester, 20-credit courses will make it possible for students to go abroad for one semester only. This is expected to increase take-up. In order for this to be possible, however, it will be necessary for all assessment of semester 1 courses to be completed at the end of semester 1, which, given the constraints on the Christmas examination diet, is likely to have significant implications for modes of assessment of semester 1 courses.

Recommendation 6:

The Panel **recommends** that the subject establishes a Quality Enhancement review cycle to realise the benefits from the enhancement aspect of quality processes. This includes engaging in ongoing discussions about teaching and learning by reflecting on and sharing the good practice identified (e.g. in external examiners' reports), reviewing pedagogical practice and student learning and then identifying areas for development as part of the cycle of a quality enhancement process and as part of this process ensure the feedback loop to GTAs and students is effectively closed (see 3.8.5). [paragraph 4.1.1]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Recommendation 8:

The Panel recommends that the subject review the approach to Staff-Student Liaison Committees to ensure that the broader student body are engaged in identifying issues for, and are informed of outcomes from, formal staff-student liaison meetings and informal discussions between class representatives and staff as well as ensuring SSLC minutes are an accurate record of the meeting and actions are carried over to the following meetings. [paragraph 5.1.3]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

These two recommendations are taken together, since they are closely related. The subject area was assigned an intern for support in this area, who has taken minutes at SSL meetings and who will be running a series of focus groups for students at each level in April. (These groups were originally planned for January but were postponed due to bereavement.) Examiners' reports have been considered at subject area meetings. Students have been consulted in the planning of the new level two course, and in relation to forms of assessment on the level 2 course Christian Traditions and Transformations. Student consultation will also be a key aspect in designing the new Honours provision over the next six months. TRS staff will be undertaking a review of specific feedback from the SSLs and a reflection on the teaching this past year at the AMR meetings scheduled for 11/12 June. These discussions will feed into the June subject area meeting.

Recommendation 7:

The Panel recommends that TRS reflect on the extent and quality of support provided to GTAs to ensure that they are appropriately trained, inducted and provided with sufficient guidance and ongoing feedback and support to carry out their duties. [paragraph 3.8.6]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject**
For information: Academic Development Unit, Learning and Teaching Centre*

Response:

The School of Critical Studies as a whole has been undertaking a review of provision for GTAs, including appointment, training and support. Meanwhile, an informal shadowing scheme continues to operate in TRS; this will be put on a more formal footing with the introduction of new procedures in 2015/16. Course conveners have been encouraged to meet regularly with GTAs. The Head of Subject will hold a debriefing meeting with all GTAs after the examination period and new procedures will be implemented School-wide moving into the next academic session.

Recommendation 9:

The Panel **recommends** that the subject engage more fully with the Graduate Attributes agenda by reviewing current course and programme information to articulate them more explicitly. [paragraph 3.2.2]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

All teaching staff, particularly in Honours courses, have been encouraged to make clear to students the role of requirements such as class presentations and group work for fostering graduate attributes. As noted above, TRS is currently revising its Honours provision. Aims and objectives and ILOs for all courses will include explicit reference to one or more graduate attributes. Across the TRS Honours curriculum, course assessment will take various forms, including projects; presentations; design of websites, Wiki-pages, and information boards; and reflective journaling, alongside more standard forms of assessment such as essays, unseen examinations and translation exercises.

Recommendation 10:

The Panel recommends the subject agrees minimum standards for timeliness and level of detail provided in feedback on assessment. [paragraph 3.3.4]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

The University policy of a three-week turnaround for the return of marked work was reiterated at the subject area meetings in June and September, and appropriate marking return dates publicised on all course Moodles for each piece of assessed work. Records of marking return dates have been kept throughout the year. These have revealed some issues with the timing of assessment deadlines, particularly for the big level 1 courses, which will be discussed at the June subject area meeting. In addition, conversations with individual members of staff will take place where necessary.

Students were invited to attend focus groups to give their input into a process of reflection on what constitutes useful feedback. Although these were poorly attended, some useful insights emerged. Discussions of feedback were also conducted within some level 2 classes. In addition, feedback forms from several other universities have provided a useful model. During summer 2015, TRS will redesign its standard feedback form to include fewer categories, which will make them less onerous for staff members to complete and, we hope, more useful to students. Honours feedback forms will include space for a contribution from the second marker. In line with revised College policy, TRS is currently putting in place provision to notify students of their examination results and to provide generic feedback on examinations.

Recommendation 11:

The Panel recommends that TRS review the timeliness of materials being made accessible on Moodle, especially where this is to support students with a disability, to ensure the approach supports student learning. [paragraph 3.6.4]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

TRS would submit that it is not always possible for course materials to be made available in advance of classes, particularly when a course is being taught for the first time. When this is the case, all students should be made aware of the fact, and in these cases, staff have been asked to explain the situation to students.

For repeat courses, when materials already exist, these are best distributed via Moodle and not via e-mails which are heavy on staff time. For this purpose, TRS would suggest that it would be useful to have a category of Moodle enrolment which would allow its members to see designated "hidden" resources on Moodle. At present, it is only possible either to make all teaching materials to all students via Moodle in advance, which pedagogically is not always desirable, or to enrol students with a disability access to these materials as a non-editing staff member, which gives them access to all hidden materials (including, for instance, tutorial times which have not yet been updated or are not yet on general release; this caused some confusion in one course).

Recommendation 13:

The Panel recommends TRS review the available University-wide resources to ensure that students in Theology and Religious Studies benefit from the broad-range of student learning support mechanisms available beyond the subject. [paragraph 3.6.5]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

TRS staff are aware of the value of these resources, and students speak very highly of the support offered. However, TRS (and no doubt other parts of the university) would be greatly helped in their endeavour to raise awareness of these provisions if better publicity materials were produced by the learning and teaching support unit, including posters, and links to the course programme which could to be posted on class Moodles. It would also be helpful if a learning and teaching unit staff member might be available to offer a 5-minute presentation on the courses available in the week before reading week.

Recommendation 14:

The Panel recognised the challenges imposed on PGT provision due to the sudden change in staffing and **recommends** the subject progress the re-development of PGT provision which identifies and capitalises on Glasgow's distinctive provision and expertise, and builds on interdisciplinary links across Schools and Colleges. [paragraph 1.4.3]

*For the attention of: the **Head of Subject***

Response:

During 2014-15, TRS has rebranded its existing taught Masters programme as Religion, Literature and Culture. A new Masters programme in Values-Based Practice has run

successfully in its first year. A Masters programme in Political Islam is currently being developed, with a view to running it from 2016-17.