

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 15 April 2016

**Periodic Subject Review: Responses to the Recommendations
Arising from the Periodic Subject Review of Geographical & Earth
Sciences held on 16 and 17 February 2015**

Ryan Reed, Clerk to the Review Panel

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

Recommendation 1:

The Panel **recommends** that the School undertake a systematic curriculum mapping and review exercise to address a number of recommendations below which suggest approaches to increasing efficiency and further enhancing the excellent learning and teaching practice within the School. The Panel makes this recommendation in acknowledgement of the pressures explicated by the School in terms of staffing and physical resources. The further recommendations and suggestions below cross-reference this paragraph and should be considered as expanding on this recommendation. [Paragraph 4.1]

For the attention of: **Head of School****Response:**

GES participated in a preliminary curriculum mapping and review exercise of the Earth Science degree in summer 2015. This was carried out in association with David Morrison, research assistant on the University's LEAF project (Leading Enhancements in Assessment and Feedback). One outcome of this initial review was the recognition that there was over-assessment in the Earth Science Level 4 core course, and as a consequence it was proposed that one of the constituent modules of the Level 4 Portfolio C course be removed from the core curriculum and offered as an option course. This new option course was approved by the College Board of Studies in Feb 2016, and will be on offer during the 2016-17 session (see response to recommendation 2 below). The Staff Student Liaison Committee meeting in November 2015 discussed Assessment and Feedback as part of its discussions on the PSR report. The Head of Learning & Teaching, the Head of Earth Science Teaching, and a member of the Geography teaching team attended the LEAF Symposium in October 2015. The Head of Learning & Teaching is a participant in the LEAF 2 project, which aims to produce a University of Glasgow assessment and feedback toolkit for use by staff and students across the University. This project has recently appointed a RA, and the expectation is that an initial Toolkit will be available by end of July 2016, and that this will be trialled and evaluated during academic session 2016-17, leading to an updated LEAF 2.0 toolkit by the end of July 2017. GES intends to use version 1 of the toolkit in academic session 2016-17 to review its teaching provision, in partnership with students (and intends to offer internships to honours students to work on this project during summer 2016).

Recommendation 2:

The Panel **recommends** that the School consider how, whilst continuing to support strong independent scholarship and practice, it might be possible to find further common ground in the development and delivery of shared or generic curriculum content. For example, where there is overlap in ILOs linked to the development of transferable skills, or other generic curriculum content, across programmes this should be highlighted to ensure that curriculum design and development takes this into account. This might lead to the delivery of additional common courses/teaching across programmes in Earth Sciences and Geography. This should be considered as part of the review recommended at 4.1 [Paragraph 4.1.1]

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

Response:

GES has started evolving its teaching provision towards an increased proportion of shared curriculum content between our degree streams. As a first step we have increased the number of existing courses which are available to all our students, particularly where there is some overlap in intended learning outcomes. After reviewing course content and admission requirements, the School Learning & Teaching Committee has agreed that, where appropriate, honours options courses previously restricted to one degree programme, would be made available to students from other degree programmes subject to meeting admission requirements and timetabling constraints. In addition, proposals for a new course which focusses on generic skills development and would be offered to students in both the Geography and the Earth Science degree programmes – Geo-Problem Solving – was approved by the College Board of Studies in February 2016, and will run in academic session 2016-17. The School's Class Representatives expressed strong support at their meeting with the SRC representative in February 2016 – "*the geo problem solving course would be a really valuable addition...*"; Hannah Kay, School SRC Representative. Timetabling constraints, which are significant in our degrees, will be minimised for this course by increased online delivery and use of ePortfolios for group work. A significant number of staff have been recruited in recent months, and a total of eight new undergraduate courses have been approved by the College Board of Studies, and particular attention has been paid to ensuring that these new courses are available to both Geography and Earth Science students wherever feasible. In addition, GES is working on developing proposals for a new 20-credit Level 1 course from 2017-18 intended for both Earth Science and Geography students. This course will focus on natural resources and generic skill development. It will be developed in partnership with students and be delivered by a blend of face-to-face and online content (the proposal was submitted to the University's BOLD (Blended Online Delivery) programme, and has been selected for further development after the first round of review).

Recommendation 3:

The Panel **recommends** that the School undertake a mapping of programme and course level ILOs to their associated schemes of assessment, ensuring that ILOs are appropriately and sufficiently assessed but that there is not an unnecessary burden placed on students, or indeed staff. This exercise should ensure that a holistic view is taken of the number and type of assessments across courses, subjects and disciplines, appropriately linked to the aims and ILOs of the relevant *programmes*. The Leading Enhancements in Assessment and Feedback (LEAF) project would be a natural vehicle for these actions. Should an extension to the project be secured then the School might consider participating, and in any case may benefit from exploring the Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB) methodology utilised as part of the LEAF project. Where necessary, assessment should be rationalised or modified and aligned to an agreed School and programme level plan for

assessment. This should be carried out as part of the mapping and review exercise recommended at 4.1.

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

Response:

As described in our responses to recommendations 1 and 2 above, GES has carried out preliminary analyses using the LEAF approach, which has already resulted in curriculum changes. In addition we are an active participant in the LEAF 2.0 project, which aims to deliver an assessment and feedback toolkit which GES will utilise to review of its teaching provision in 2016-17.

Recommendation 4:

The Panel **recommends** that the School review its provision of feedback to students and explore the introduction of timetabled feedback sessions, as outlined in its action plan. The School should ensure that there is consistency in the format and detail of feedback where possible and should continue to use 'feedback monitoring forms' as it does currently. The provision of feedback should be considered as part of the review recommended at 4.1.2 and again, the School may find the use of Curriculum Mapping and Assessment Blueprinting (CMAB) methodology helpful when considering the use of feedback. [Paragraph 4.2.4]

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

Response:

The responses to recommendations 1-3 above are again relevant. In terms of specific feedback actions, the School has adopted a common design for both generic and individual feedback forms. Feedback sessions have been timetabled into some of our courses, but in others it has proved to be much more effective to devote time within timetabled practical laboratory sessions to providing feedback as these sessions are popular and well-attended. Individual feedback provision is already extensive and has been enhanced, particularly at honours level, for example to both Level 4 Geography and Earth Science students during their dissertation/research project. Earth Science students have additional individual face-to-face feedback from staff involved in marking components of their independent field mapping project. Providing such feedback is very demanding of staff time, and will be reviewed as part of the LEAF 2.0 project.

Recommendation 5:

In order to reduce the administrative workload on academic staff the Panel **recommends** that the School consider how existing administrative staff might be supported to take a further proportion of the administrative workload. In the first instance, this might be facilitated through a review of convening roles, asking incumbents to identify the range of administrative tasks that are being undertaken by academic staff. In the longer term the School should liaise with the College of Science & Engineering on the possible appointment of a Teaching Administrator. [Paragraph 5.1]

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

For information: **Head of College of Science & Engineering**

Response:

Funding for a Teaching Administrator was included in GES's 2015-16 budget application, and this was approved. A Teaching Administrator was appointed and started work in January 2016. This appointment will have a major impact on the administrative load allocation for all staff, and over the next year these loads are being reviewed and optimised

by the Head of School Administration and the Head of Learning & Teaching, with the aim of streamlining individual workloads. Major administrative tasks (e.g. timetabling and elements of Board of Studies business such as new course approval procedures) have already been transferred from academic staff to the Teaching Administrator.

Recommendation 6:

To further develop a strategic approach, the Panel **recommends** that the School consider how it might disseminate examples of good practice in learning and teaching across the School in order that a strategic and, where appropriate, systematic approach to enhancement can be secured. Whilst the Panel acknowledged the need to maintain distinct disciplines within the School, and that learning and teaching approaches would be necessarily different depending on both the students and the courses and programmes being delivered, it was of the view that some practices could be more effectively shared and embedded across the School, perhaps in some cases leading to greater efficiency. [Paragraph 2.2]

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

Response:

The School has established a Learning & Teaching seminar series, and has invited both internal and external speakers. Learning and Teaching issues, including highlighted examples of good practice, are discussed at all staff meetings. Annual teaching meetings are held in both degree programmes and act as an important focus for discussion and dissemination of teaching innovation. Practical outcomes from these meetings are widely disseminated, including via a dedicated Learning and Teaching Moodle site. GES is promoting a culture that actively encourages staff to publish on their teaching expertise, and papers have been published or are being written in conjunction with staff from the Learning & Teaching Centre on topics such as partnership with students in curriculum design and development, GTA training, and field skills teaching. A number of examples of good teaching practices have disseminated across our teaching provision (for example the use of AROPA for peer assessment). The GTA training programme developed in the Geography degree [which received a College Teaching Excellence Team Award in 2014-2015] has been extended to the Earth Science degree. It remains a major challenge to get staff assembled in face-to-face meetings, so the intention is to involving the Teaching Administrator in co-ordinate the documenting and disseminations of good practice from our teaching (e.g. by the preparation of periodic L&T newsletters, which would be stored centrally to form a digital resource available to all staff). It is anticipated the LEAF analysis discussed in the responses to recommendations 1-4 above will provide a meaningful view of the range of teaching practices adopted across the School.

Recommendation 7:

The Panel **recommends** that the College of Science and Engineering, and where appropriate other colleges, consider how changes to regulations across colleges, capping of student numbers on some courses (not in GES), and the resulting movement of students is impacting on GES and other Schools or Subjects. Further, there should be consideration by the College of Science & Engineering of what could or should be done to alleviate any particular pressures. Academic Standard Committee may wish to consider any response from the College(s) and decide whether any further action is required. The levers available to Schools to mitigate against such adverse impacts were limited within the current flexible structures. This made operational management of the associated issues extremely challenging. For example, coping with large fluctuations in student numbers from year to year, and the impact of high numbers on accommodation, the organisation, staffing, and timetabling of sustainable laboratory and field courses, the

supervision of undergraduate research projects and related use of specialist equipment, and on the overall workload of teaching staff presented the School with particular difficulties (discussed further at 5.2). [Paragraph 3.1]

For the attention of: **Head of College of Science & Engineering, Dean of Learning & Teaching (College of Science & Engineering), Academic Standards Committee**

For information: **Deans of Learning & Teaching**

Response: Head of College of Science & Engineering and Dean (Learning & Teaching)

This is a complicated issue and affects different cohorts of students in a multiplicity of ways.

1. MA Geography students are severely constrained by the rule imposed by the College of Arts that at least 120 credits taken in the first two years must be Arts subjects, which do not include Geography. The same problem applies to the MA programmes in Mathematics and Psychology and to a wide range of joint programmes.

The College of Science and Engineering believes that this rule should be deleted in its present form because it is an unreasonable constraint on students' choices and conflicts with the flexibility promised to students in [Degrees in Arts, Science and Social Sciences](#). The Dean of L&T is pursuing other solutions to this problem with the VP (Academic and Educational Innovation) but progress is slow.

2. In 2014–15 a very large number of Life Science students chose first year Earth Science, overloading the class. This was not repeated in 2015–16 and the reason is unknown. These students are required to take Chemistry but have a wide choice for their third subject.
3. Many students in GES would like to choose Biology as one of their first year subjects but enrolment has been restricted in the past few years, making it very difficult for these students to complete their curriculum. This has affected other students in the college as well, notably in Chemistry.

The problem arose because of a shortage of staff in the School of Life Sciences and harmonious discussions have taken place through the Science Taught Programmes Committee to resolve the issue. It was hoped that no problems would arise in 2015–16 but the way in which enrolment was implemented in MyCampus put unintended limits on enrolment. This has now been resolved.

A survey of level 1 classes was undertaken to investigate the number of students who had not been able to enrol in the courses of their choice. About 70% reported that they got all the courses that they wished and only 18 had been unable to enrol because courses were full (many had hoped to study English Literature or languages). CoMVLS offered to increase the size of the first year biology class if demand would justify it but this appears not to be necessary.

4. A new first year course on Natural Resources is being developed by GES, which would complement the existing courses on Geography and Earth Science. It is intended to work with Environmental Biology or Science Skills to complete a student's curriculum and should satisfy many students' interests.
5. The College is working closely with MaRIO to control admission to subjects more closely but Earth Science was over target again for 2015–16. It is not clear how this can be controlled better without a differential tariff, which we would prefer to avoid; it may be worth considering a requirement for Mathematics, which has been imposed for Psychology, but this must be justified on academic grounds.

Response – School:

GES understands that discussions between Colleges have been taking place and is ongoing, and that this issue has been addressed in a response from the Dean of Learning & Teaching. Our proposal of a new Level 1 course, delivered by a blend on online and face-to-face teaching is one internal response intended, *inter alia*, to reduce the prospect of severe congestion in lectures and laboratories in our level 1 classes. The class sizes in both Geography 1 and Earth Science 1 were monitored closely on a daily basis during the 2015-16 enrolment period, and the current class numbers are close to optimal in both subjects.

Response – Academic Standards Committee

Awaited.

Recommendation 8:

The use of industry specific software and technologies was important to students, and some suggested that the use of this software more extensively and consistently throughout the programmes offered within the School may enhance employability. The Panel **recommends** that the School consider an 'ideal state' in regard to the physical and I.T resources that might be made available to students in light of the forthcoming campus redevelopment and investments and develop this into a plan that could potentially be used to present information and guide decisions in this area. This might be linked to a broader plan highlighted as part of the recommendation at 5.2. The Panel also suggests that the School keep under review the type of industry software which might enhance student employability and wherever practicable ensure that this is utilised as fully as possible in the programmes and courses on offer. [Paragraph 3.4.2]

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

Response:

Industry specific software is available for both our degree streams, and GES is keen to utilise these more widely in our teaching provision. The constraints which have prevented this being more widely incorporated into our teaching previously are firstly the availability of necessary IT equipment and facilities, and secondly the availability of staff with the necessary expertise to teach these topics. For example, in terms of equipment, extending GIS teaching provision across all our degrees would require equipping a Gregory lab with 60+ laptop computers. The Head of Learning & Teaching has also been investigating the IT requirements to allow us to utilise digital mapping software in the Earth Science degree. The manufacturers of digital geological mapping software (a key future development target within the Earth Science Programme) have offered their package free, and offered to help with implementation as a teaching resource. To implement the geological mapping software the School would require, in addition to the laptops, a stock of tablet computers, waterproof covers, and multiple charging facilities to allow outdoor digital acquisition of basic field mapping measurements and data. In addition there are staff workload considerations around the proposed implementation of these software packages. GES has seen a large number of new staff appointments recently, and more are in the pipeline, so the range of teaching expertise and interests cannot be fully assessed at this stage; it is likely that some staff training would be required to implement these software packages. GES is investigating the prospects of acquiring some of all of these items (via CAPEX bids, LTDF proposals).

Recommendation 9:

The Panel **recommends** that the Academic Standards Committee consider whether the School should reinstate the use of the full range of secondary bands within all primary grades for each piece of assessment which is marked within the School. This issue was considered by the previous DPTLA review in 2008 and, at that time, in consultation with

the Convenor of the Code of Assessment working Group a view was taken that the application of the Code of Assessment was appropriate. The Panel is of the view that this issue should be reconsidered by Academic Standards Committee, given the time that has passed and potential changes in practice since the time of the last review. This was last considered by the Academic Standards Committee in May 2009. [Paragraph 4.2.2]

For the attention of: **Academic Standards Committee**

For information: **Head of School, Dean of Learning & Teaching (College of Science & Engineering)**

Response - School:

GES have, as requested, provided a written response to the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee of the Academic Standards Committee about this issue (the response is attached below as Appendix 1).

Recommendation 10:

The Panel **recommends** that the School seek guidance from College Human Resources on the development and promotion of University Teachers to ensure that School practice is in line with University policy and that its University Teachers are provided with the best advice possible on advancing their careers. They may also wish to consult Human Resources on the existing roles and responsibilities of University Teachers employed in the different disciplines within the School. [Paragraph 5.1]

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

For information: **Head of Human Resources, College of Science & Engineering**

Response:

GES has confirmed the job description of University Teachers with HR, and currently has two recently appointed, early career University Teachers (UT) – one appointed in 2014 and the other in 2015. It is encouraging, in terms of career development prospects, that one former UT in GES has recently transferred to the Research and Teaching track, and another former UT has become the Learning and Teaching Administrator for the School. All recently appointed staff have an experienced mentor, and GES is actively developing informal mentoring within the School. GES holds an Athena Swan bronze award, and in March 2016 the 'Swan@GES' team has organised an 'informal mentoring' session for all staff, to develop a programme of informal mentoring relationships which is intended to provide support and encouragement as an important step in both skills development and personal development. In addition the Athena Swan Committee in GES arranged a well-attended workshop on academic 'transition and promotions' for staff in December 2015 which was delivered jointly by GES staff and Human Resources. The Head of Learning & Teaching took part as a mentor in the University's Athena SWAN/Researcher Development Pilot Mentoring Scheme in academic year 2014-15. In GES all UTs are encouraged to actively engage in scholarship/research as part of their career development profile. The Head of Learning & Teaching took part in the pilot of the University's 'Recognising Excellence in Teaching' (RET) programme in 2014-15, and achieved a Senior Fellowship (as well as a Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy) and another senior member of staff is participating in the 2015-16 RET programme. The intention is that senior staff with these qualifications will act as internal mentors for other members of staff. Our understanding is that the University promotions criteria have recently been revised, and we are committed to ensuring that existing University Teachers are provide with continuing guidance and mentoring on career development and promotions. GES recently held a promotions event for all staff where the career development pathways were reviewed and discussed.

Recommendation 11:

The Panel **recommends** that the School audit its workload model with a view to ensuring that it is as effective, simple and transparent as possible. [Paragraph 5.2]

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

Response:

Previously the School made use of an in-house developed workload model, but is now adopting the standard University workload model, and is in the process of transferring the necessary information into this model. The Head of School, Head of School Administration, Head of Learning & Teaching, the Teaching Administrator, and the School's representative on the workload working group have undergone training in the use of the University workload model.

Recommendation 12:

The Panel **recommends** that the School, in consultation with the College of Science & Engineering, considers its needs for the development of adequate facilities over the medium and longer term and develops a plan based on an 'ideal state' in this respect. Whilst it was beyond the remit of the Panel to recommend that further resources be allocated or facilities be provided, it was of the view that a documented and coherent plan, linked to the growth in student numbers and current plans for *future* growth, would support the School in articulating its needs effectively in the context of future campus investments. [Paragraph 5.2]

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

For information: **Head of College of Science & Engineering**

Response:

GES is evolving a plan for the ideal state of teaching facilities and equipment over the medium and longer term. The plan will incorporate sections on physical infrastructure, staffing, equipment, teaching methods, fieldwork, laboratory work, internationalisation, diversity and equal opportunity, and degree programme provision. The top infrastructure priority is a single building for GES, rather than the two widely-separated buildings it currently occupies (East Quadrangle of the Main Building, and the Gregory Building in Lilybank Gardens). GES remains fully committed to face-to-face teaching in lectures, laboratories, and the field as the primary method of delivery of our campus-based teaching. The School believes that accommodating future growth in student numbers will be most effectively achieved by blending more traditional teaching methods with the judicious use of online content, ePortfolios, and enhanced use of social space for group and peer-assisted learning. In terms of our core fieldwork requirement, the intention is to retain our already highly optimised day and residential fieldwork programme (in keeping with national and international norms and expectations for our subjects), but to reinforce this with enhanced use of the campus for basic field skills training (e.g. 'Rock Around the University', which is a unique teaching resource for field skills training based on rock samples precisely located around the campus) and its future development. In addition GES seeks to further enhance and evolve our already highly-regarded fieldwork programme by the increased use of digital resources (such as GIS, digital mapping, and online virtual 'geo-worlds'). This approach would facilitate expansion of our international teaching. As part of this process of developing a teaching plan, the Head of Learning & Teaching has visited facilities in another University and consulted with colleagues about future needs. The practicalities of elements of the plan are being tested, and GES has proposed teaching some courses in the refurbished and redesigned teaching spaces developed as part of the new active learning spaces pilot project which is taking place in the University in 2016-17. The GES plan will be reviewed

annually in the light of pedagogic developments, the appointment of new staff, and the availability of teaching facilities in the new Teaching Hub.

Recommendation 13:

The Panel **recommends** that the School revisit what options are available to secure accreditation for the Earth Sciences programme. If the School remains of the view that accreditation is inappropriate it should set out a clear and considered rationale which is available to students and anybody else with an interest. Whilst the Panel recognises and acknowledges the School's concerns both about the impact of additional field day requirements on students, and the Schools views on the relevance and efficacy of field days as a measure of student skills development, it is very important to be *absolutely clear* about the reasons for not pursuing the relevant professional recognition of the programme. The School is also encouraged to work in partnership with other institutions to make its concerns known to the Geological Society of London in a coordinated and concerted way. [Paragraph 6.1.2]

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

Response:

GES is actively participating in national discussions about the future of geological fieldwork, and the outcomes of these discussion will have direct relevance for the prospects of accrediting the Earth Science degree programme. UK Earth Science degree programmes are accredited by the Geological Society of London (GSL), and the GSL Accreditation Officer (Professor Andy Saunders, University of Leicester) has accepted an invitation from GES to visit the University in the spring of 2016 to discuss the accreditation of our degree programme. The main reason why GES has not previously applied for accreditation of our Earth Science programme is that a primary criterion for accreditation has, until now, been a requirement for a specified minimum number of days spent on fieldwork, rather than an assessment of the level of field skills development displayed by the students. This is a particular issue for GES, which has an on-campus field training resource ('Rock Around the University') which no other UK university possesses, and this resource allows UoG students to receive comprehensive outdoor training in geological field skills within timetabled term-time laboratory sessions. As a consequence, GES currently runs a highly-optimised schedule of residential field courses which achieves all the nationally-accepted field skills development and 'real-life' experiences, but with fewer days spent in the field that is the case for many other Earth Science degrees in the UK. In reality most of GES's Earth Science graduates easily fulfil all accreditation criteria. However a small number of our graduates may fall short of this specified minimum number of field days despite having all of the necessary skills, primarily because of their choice of option courses. A succession of external examiners have confirmed that the field and mapping skills of all our graduates are excellent, so we believe that using the number of fieldwork days for accreditation is an outdated concept (especially with resources such as our unique 'Rock Around the University' providing such an effective on-campus training resource for fieldwork – hence reducing the days needed to be spent in the field). GES was not willing to contemplate two streams doing the same degree programme but with some students not gaining accreditation. Nor could GES find any educational case for arbitrarily increasing the number of unaccompanied field days in the student mapping project. Such a step would impact adversely on student finances, equality and diversity, and engagement, and is unrepresentative of industry practice. Accreditation is not mandatory for professional Earth Scientists, and the lack of accreditation currently has minimal impact on recruitment into Earth Science at the UoG (which is at record levels and consistently well above target), reflecting the perceived quality of our Earth Science programme and the employability of our graduates. There has been no demand for accreditation among our undergraduates or alumni. In reality meeting current accreditation targets for fieldwork days would require unjustified, across the board, increases

for all our students, including those with family commitments or financial constraints for whom additional field days would be a significant burden. As indicated above, GES is participating actively in ongoing national discussions with our colleagues and the accrediting body. In late Feb 2016 the GES Head of School and the Head of Learning & Teaching took part in a meeting on the subject of fieldwork and accreditation held jointly by University Geoscience UK and the Geological Society of London, and the possibility of basing accreditation on either skills development or time in the field was one of the possibilities under discussion – GES believes that the former would be much more appropriate for the Glasgow degree. The Head of Learning & Teaching has been elected to the Executive of University Geoscience UK (formerly the Committee of Heads of UK Geology Departments) with particular responsibility for undergraduate teaching.

Appendix 1 – response from Geographical & Earth Sciences to the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee, December 2015.

Geographical & Earth Sciences

Use of full range of A grades.

GES has been asked to contribute to the deliberations of the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee (of the Academic Standards Committee) on the following recommendation of the 2014-15 Periodic Subject:-

Extract from GES PSR report, May 2015:

The Panel were generally content that assessment practices were compliant with the Code of Assessment and were an effective implementation of the University's assessment policies. However, the Panel was made aware that there had been an agreed practice of only using three of the five secondary bands available under the primary grade 'A', meaning that in each individual assessment, students could receive a grade of A1, A3 or A5, but not A2 or A4. All five secondary bands were used when describing aggregate performance. There was a decision within the School to maintain this approach, as noted in the minutes of the School Learning & Teaching Committee held in December 2013.

*The Panel **recommends** that the Academic Standards Committee consider whether the School should reinstate the use of the full range of secondary bands within all primary grades for each piece of assessment which is marked within the School. This issue was considered by the previous DPTLA review in 2008 and, at that time, in consultation with the Convenor of the Code of Assessment working Group a view was taken that the application of the Code of Assessment was appropriate. The Panel is of the view that this issue should be reconsidered by Academic Standards Committee, given the time that has passed and potential changes in practice since the time of the last review. This was last considered by the Academic Standards Committee in May 2009.*

GES response, 16 December 2015:-

Background:

GES has used a restricted range of A grades (A1= 22, A3=20 and A5=18) since the University changed the Code of Assessment to a 22 point scale. This policy was adopted because of difficulties of generating specific grade related criteria for five grade subdivisions, as compared to the more normal three-fold subdivision (e.g. B+, B and B-), and a reluctance of markers to award the highest grade of a five point scale (in particular in essay questions). This approach was commended by a Geography examiner in 2006, and in general encouraged the award of higher grades which more fairly rewarded excellence. *[Further details were provided to the Academic Regulations SubCommittee in the form of an Appendix from an extract from the GES DPTLA submission in 2007.]*

DPTLA 2008:

The policy was queried by the DPTLA panel in its 2008 report, and on its recommendation the approach was raised with the Convenor of the Code of Assessment Working Group. The primary query was whether the adoption of the full scale would encourage the use of higher grades. However during that review, an analysis of the assessment outcomes at all levels over the previous 12 years indicated that the proportion of first class degrees had actually increased after the adopting of the 3-point A scale. The conclusion of the consultation was that:-

“The extent of the departure from normal practice was found, however, to be less significant than is implied by the Panel’s encouragement that the full scale should be used. The full range of A1 to H is recognised and all points within that range may appear as outcomes of aggregation at course and programme level. All that is missing is the availability to markers in the first instance of the points A2 and A4. Professor Hoey and Dr Sharp argued convincingly that this did not have a dampening effect on marks since, as prescribed, the default A-grade was an A3, and a ‘better than default’ would have to be an A1.”

“...we felt that what the Department was doing was consistent with the spirit of the Code and varied less from its letter than might have first appeared to be the case. Indeed, other departments would do well to follow the example set by Geographical & Earth Sciences as outlined in the preceding paragraph.” [Further details were provided to the Academic Regulations SubCommittee in the form of an Appendix based on an extract from Academic Standards Committee Minutes, May 2009].

2011-13:

Subsequently the issue was raised by Geography external examiners, and as a result the School carried out a two-year trial of the use of the full range of grades in 2011-13. The outcome demonstrated a marked difference in outcome between the Geography and the Earth Science degree, with no A1 grades awarded in Geography over the two-year period, while 20% of the A grades awarded in Earth Science were A1s. As the School was not willing to adopt two different marking schemes across its degrees, and the data suggested that the introduction of the 5-point scale would reduce the number of top grades awarded, it was decided to recommend that the use of the 3-point scale be re-instated for the marking of individual items of assessment, although the full range was to be used for the aggregation grade, as has always been the case [Further details were provided to the Academic Regulations SubCommittee in the form of an Appendix based on an extract from School Learning and Teaching Committee minutes, Dec 2013.]

Current situation:

The School L&T Committee (including the SRC representative for GES) discussed the issue at its meeting on 14 Dec 2015, and strongly endorsed the continued use of the three-point scale. The Committee expressed the opinion that there had been no significant change since the last review in 2008, which concluded that the procedure was consistent with the spirit of the Code of Assessment, “and varied less from its letter than might have first appeared to be the case”. Furthermore the 2011-13 trial of the 5-point scale highlighted the fact that the use of the 3-point scale worked in favour of the students by encouraging markers to fully reward excellence in essay-style assessments, and additionally had the advantage of being consistent with the stated university policy of first identifying the grade band, and then deciding whether the work was above (A1) or below (A5) the ‘default’ (i.e. A3). Despite considerable efforts within the school, it had not proved possible to develop dedicated grade related criteria (identified as a strength of our approach) which effectively and consistently allowed the application of the increased granularity of a 5-point system. It was also mentioned that the grade profiles in both the ES and Geography degree streams has improved dramatically over the last 10 years (to the point that they were now broadly comparable with the College and Russell Group averages), although the use of the 3-point A scale was only one of several factors that were thought to have contributed to this improvement.

In response to the query concerning the opinions of the Geography External Examiners, they have not raised this issue in their reports over recent years, and have been complementary about assessment practices:-

Geography External Thomas (Oxford) 2014-15:-

“Once again marking and moderation was consistent and fair in the papers that I read material from. Standards within degree classes were comparable with that in other institutions in which I have examined. I can also reiterate the comment I made last year: the standard at the top end is extremely high. This year 14 first class awards is testimony to the quality of students and of teaching.”

Geography External Laurie (Newcastle) 2014-15:-

“Marking was carried out extremely diligently and rigorously. There were many examples of best practice in feedback. I would like to draw attention in particular to the marking of the development geography module in 4th year where essay feedback pointed out the steps that need to be taken to improve work in the future. The students who we met with commented on how they appreciated the range of assessment methods used across their degrees.

We reviewed all borderline cases which involved all 3rd and 4th year papers for ten candidates. We also looked at the top marked dissertations which were impressive both in terms of quality of the students' work and the in-depth engagement with this from the markers.”

Geography External Thomas (Oxford) 2013-14:-

“Marking was consistent and evidence of internal moderation was satisfactory. Student work mapped on to degree levels in a way comparable with other institutions that I have taught and examined in. The quality at the top end was admirable.”

Geography External Lee (London), 2013-14 – in his final report:-

“Progress' has, it seems to me, taken the form of enhancing what was already an excellent system when I arrived and which is, therefore, even better today. The fundamental reasons for this continuous improvement are the seriousness with which the School treats assessment and the careful thought that continues to be put into improvements to it, the School's openness towards critical self-reflexivity, and the independence of externals and the trust placed in them by the School and the University.”