

University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Friday 15 April 2016

Periodic Subject Review: Responses to Recommendations Arising from the Periodic Subject Review of History held on 13 March 2015

Mrs Clare Barnes, Clerk to the Review Panel

Conclusion

The Review Panel, guided by the views of the External Subject Specialists, confirmed that, at the time of the Review, programmes offered by the School were current and valid in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and of practice in its application.

This Review has identified that attention should be given to the diversification of assessment methods and making the development of transferable skills more explicit to students.

The Review Panel observed a successful, dedicated and hard-working Subject that provided a very strong student-focused environment. The Panel was extremely impressed with the focus on, and enthusiasm for, face-to-face delivery of teaching with small numbers of students and the one-on-one support given to students. It was evident that with the numbers of students this required a substantial commitment from staff, but it was evidently very beneficial to the student experience.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made to support the Subject in its reflection and to enhance provision in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. The Review Panel recognises that several of the recommendations relate to issues that the subject area itself had highlighted for further development in the course of the review or in the SER. The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are grouped together by the areas for improvement/enhancement and are ranked in order of priority within each section.

Preamble - History:

The History Subject were delighted with the very positive feedback they received from the PSR panel. Since the visit of the review panel, academic staff, together with administrative staff and students have undertaken research in light of the report and have met to discuss the recommendations of the report and any actions which ought to result from it. All relevant committees and all relevant personnel (including the Head of School, the Dean of T&L (Arts), the Convener of T&L (Humanities) and staff in the Learning & Teaching Unit) have been consulted to ensure that our response is as comprehensive and as well aligned to the recommendations as we can make it.

Recommendation 1

The Review Panel **recommends** less reliance on final exams by introducing a wider range of assessment methods across the curriculum as it was their view that the current requirement for UG course assessment to consist of minimum 60 percent unseen final exam and a maximum of 40 percent for other modes of assessment was too prescriptive. [paragraph 5.2.7].

Action: Head of Subject

For information: Head of School

Response:

The acquisition of knowledge is a crucial objective in any Honours programme in History. The History Benchmark Statement (2014) notes:

History programmes do not impart knowledge and skills to be passively absorbed: questioning, reading, discussion and writing, along with engagement, exploration and discovery through independent learning on the part of the student are essential. But the importance of historical knowledge must be stressed [paragraph HBS, 2.11].

Given the nature of historical knowledge and historical inquiry it is important to acknowledge the central place that examinations have in the assessment regime of any History programme and to stress that unseen examinations can be and are designed in a variety of ways.

That said, having discussed current practice, the experience of comparable institutions, and History's curriculum ambitions, and having explored the weighting of coursework and examinations with the Staff Student Liaison Committee, the Teaching & Learning Convener, supported by a motion from the Teaching & Learning Sub-Committee [T&LC], recommended to the History Subject Area at its meeting in 27 January that the current requirement for course assessment be changed to specify a minimum of 50 percent unseen final exam except in particular instances where the convener makes a convincing case for an alternative regime. [History currently has a small number of courses that currently have no examinations whatsoever, and others where the examination element emerges from a seen paper.] This was approved. Given the implications that dropping the exam element below 50 percent has for second-marking and external examination, and to ensure against a sharp break in practice which, we have found, creates problems in ensuring an equivalent student experience across large cohorts, the History Subject Area was not minded to go further at this juncture. It was further recommended that in order to ensure comparability across Special Subjects and to ensure progression towards and comparability of attainment at Level 4, the assessment of all Special Subjects will require in the future, as now, an unseen examination element normally weighted at 60%.

Colleagues have been and will continue to be encouraged to utilise the full range of assessment practices in their approach to teaching and learning: many examples of best practice in this regard currently exist and have been evident in new proposals and changes going to the Board of Studies in 2015-16.

History notes and welcomes the initiative of the School of Humanities in hosting an assessment workshop in 2016 and notes its appreciation of a recent paper from the School's Teaching & Learning convener, offering exemplars of assessment regimes that illustrate best practice in the weighting and diversification of summative assessment.

Recommendation 2

The Panel **recommends** that the Subject build on the work already done as part of the LEAF project and existing good practice to map courses, programmes and progression so that course development is coherent and allows for the curriculum to foster diversity of pedagogic and learning practices [paragraph 5.1.8].

Action: Head of Subject

Response:

Ensuring progression within and across courses is central to the design of all History courses and – given the structure of single and joint Honours programmes in the Arts – History courses are particularly sensitive to meeting the quite distinct academic challenges that mark the transition of students into the Honours programme. The conveners of the

compulsory suite and optional course at levels 1 and 2 have designed each course with the knowledge, skills, methods and theoretical understanding acquired or as yet to be acquired on other courses very much in mind. We are thus quite confident that pedagogic practices across all courses are very well attuned in levels 1 and 2 to where learners are 'at'.

In light of the PSR recommendations, however, it was concluded that essay feedback mechanisms at levels 1 and 2 be revised to nurture the growing academic independence of students and foster a clearer understanding of standards. This is ongoing, and currently at a stage when new feedback templates are under discussion.

The challenge at Honours is of a different magnitude and nature. History, as one of the largest Subject Areas in the College of Arts boasts a very extensive range of Honours courses that have – quite appropriately - grown both strategically and organically over the years and relate directly to the research expertise of a changing cohort of academic practitioners. A document recording only the aims and ILOs of all courses and special subjects taught in Session 2015-2016 amounts to over 340 pages.

History endorses the aspiration of more comprehensive curriculum mapping practices in the Arts, and the current Convener of T&L examined the outputs of the LEAF project and spoke to those involved in it.

Current course approval practices in the College of Arts, however, do not easily facilitate curriculum mapping. PIP forms at present do not explicitly demand the articulation of the ways in which a new course either addresses an omission in the curriculum or how it interfaces with teaching and learning in other courses: Subjects are relied upon to ensure that duplication is avoided and progression supported (this is certainly the case in History), although paperwork rarely records this process.

The Arts Board of Studies is also resistant to Subject Areas employing a standard suite of ILOs that could facilitate comparison across courses and the identification of potential weaknesses in the curriculum.

Action on these matters at College and Senate level could greatly enhance our ability to map large programmes.

The History Subject Area would also respectfully point out that knowledge in this discipline is widely acknowledged to be cumulative rather than sequential. The History Benchmark Statement emphasises that, in terms of learning:

Qualitative advances may be achieved in a number of ways, for instance through increasing conceptual sophistication, increasing interpretative skill, increasing ability to pose, refine and pursue historical enquiries, increasing capacity for sustained written and/or oral analysis, greater independence of learning, and so on [HBS, paragraph 5.1].

Such concerns are very much to the fore in ongoing discussions at Subject level, and were critical in informing recent discussions in the T&LC which has recommended a new essay feedback sheet for Honours which explicitly utilises grade-related criteria aligned to the aims and objectives of the Honours programme as set out in the Honours Handbook.

Recommendation 3

The Review Panel **recommends** that Graduate Attributes are made more explicit to students through ensuring that they are embedded in course delivery and are regularly flagged at appropriate points throughout the curriculum [paragraph 4.4.7].

Action: Head of Subject

Response:

Starting from Session 2016-2017, Graduate Attributes will be detailed in all History course handbooks and Moodles, and will be addressed explicitly as part of students' Honours induction.

History welcomes proposals discussed at School level to integrate careers information into the Moodle VLE and notes good practice already in History courses where internships and careers services are highlighted in Moodles, and representatives of internship schemes (e.g. Club 21) are invited to speak as part of the lecture syllabus.

Recommendation 4

The Panel **recommends** that the Subject develops initiatives to enhance learning and teaching through the use of technology [paragraph 5.1.14].

Action: *Head of Subject*

Response:

The Teaching and Learning Convener requested clarification on this recommendation and liaised with LTU and the Dean of Teaching & Learning for the College, Dr Don Spaeth, who has expertise in the area of technological applications in History. There being no specific initiative in the minds of the review panel, she then conducted a survey of all History staff as to how they currently use technology in their teaching in order to identify any areas of weakness. While improvements and innovations are always possible, and History is alive to new data-sets, data-bases and online resources, the survey showed that – in comparison with peer institutions – we are certainly exploiting a wide range of resources and generating our own, e.g.

- Prof Broun is internationally acknowledged to be setting the agenda for online research and teaching resources in the area of Medieval Scottish History. From Session 2016-17 onwards, he will lead a new Special Subject in which online outputs from major AHRC research projects will form the core of the teaching and learning experience. (See People of Medieval Scotland, www.poms.ac.uk/; Breaking of Britain, www.breakingofbritain.ac.uk/)
- History staff have recently been involved in the Future Learn MOOC on Robert Burns that attracted 7,500 subscribers and will be contributing to a new BOLD initiative with colleagues in Scottish Literature.
- All History courses are Moodle-enabled; History 1A led the way in piloting the new Library digital bibliography service; all coursework essays are submitted via Moodle.
- On many courses, starting from Level 1, students experience compulsory exercises relating to online data bases (e.g. The Making of Modern Societies [Hist 2B], pre-Hons students engage with the Old Bailey Proceedings Online: www.oldbaileyonline.org/). Elsewhere in the curriculum, online resources supplement traditional training in important historical skills (e.g. palaeography [<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latinpalaeography/>]); classes are held in computer labs to facilitate online interrogation of sources (e.g. The Making of the Union of 1707 [HIST4156], intensively uses the Records of the Parliament of Scotland [www.rps.ac.uk/]); and the research underpinning undergraduate dissertations almost invariably starts with online searches of sites such as Discovery (the National Register of Archives, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>).

Members of the History Subject, who are widely networked across archival, museums, heritage and digital humanities communities globally and are ably supported by an excellent Subject Librarian, Richard Bapty, keep up with new online resources and regularly undertake

CPD on pedagogic and IT issues. There appears to be little need at present – beyond encouraging knowledge of and use of Moodle’s more interactive features - for a discrete initiative to take matters forward, although a watching brief will be maintained in this regard, and staff will be encouraged to investigate any interests they may have in the further integration of IT resources and applications in their teaching. History is to investigate the utilisation of part of its book budget for new online resources and services.

Recommendation 5

The Review Panel **recommends** the development of an approach to ensure issues of Equality and Diversity are embedded in course design and delivery [paragraph 4.2.4].

Action: Head of Subject

Response:

Having clarified that the thrust of this recommendation related to gender equality, and was grounded in a presumption that a heavy reliance on unseen examinations disadvantaged female students, the Teaching and Learning Convener in liaison with administrative staff undertook a gender audit of the final degree results for sessions 2013-14 and 2014-15.

The results were as follows:

Table: Overall results by gender, 2013-2014; 2014-5

	Session 2013-14		Session 2014-15	
	(F) Grade	(M) Grade	(F) Grade	(M) Grade
A1-A5	9	9	25	11
B1-B3	67	55	44	34
C1-C3	12	12	4	6

Key: F (female); M (male)

On the basis of this evidence there is little suggestion, as was implied at the PSR, that our current assessment regime disadvantages female students. Indeed, on the basis of these figures alone it could be argued that it is actually male students that are underperforming in comparison to their female peers.

Only a thorough assessment of discrete cohorts could ground a convincing gendered analysis of the type outlined in the PSR, but preliminary findings clearly suggest that the performance of women at undergraduate level in History at Glasgow University is very much in keeping with the most recent academic literature which emphasizes the extent to which female students have been outperforming male students for some time, and the ways in which factors such as personality, socio-economic status, and biological correlates etc. affect achievement.

Looking more broadly at issues relating to Diversity and Equality, we would note:

- The School of Humanities is commencing the process of applying for an Athena Swan Bronze award, part of which will require an analysis of student course choices and performance in History by gender.
- History (an initiative led by Dr Steven Reid) held its first widening access summer school in 2015: initial feedback indicates that this was a very successful initiative.

- History, like many other subjects in the Arts, under-recruits students from ethnic minority groups. We would encourage the University to explore ways in which its marketing and recruitment strategy might address this.

Recommendation 6

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject conduct a feasibility study with a view to development of credit bearing work based learning/ placements [paragraph 5.1.10].

Action: Head of Subject

Response:

History undertook its first work-based course in Session 2015-2016, when Dr Steven Reid collaborated with the University Special Collections Department and the Hunterian. This Honours course ('Art, Culture and Patronage in Renaissance Scotland') is very much a research-led initiative, rather than one aligned to generic workplace skills. Student feedback was very positive, and new assessment strategies were trialled in this course, taking account of the very different skills being taught and the very different learning environment. Dr Reid offered a report to the History Group at the beginning of Session 2015-16.

History are delighted to note the new College internship toolkit devised by Dr Pauline MacKay (Crit Studs):

www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/informationforstaff/studentsandteaching/placementcourses/

Information about this initiative was circulated to colleagues earlier in the year, but as yet no-one has indicated an interest in devising such a course.

The prospect of new work-based learning courses was raised with the SSLC and students tentatively welcomed the initiative. While concerns were raised at the T&LC that we must keep to the fore that we teach a History degree – and not one in, say, heritage, or archives etc. – it has been decided that consideration will be given to a work-based learning remit to be attached to the job specification of any future appointment in History.

Recommendation 7

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Subject area continues to adopt and progress a workload model and recognises that this is currently being taken forward by the College [paragraph 5.4.3].

Action: Head of Subject

For information: Head of School

Response:

The University recently announced that it would be introducing a new institution wide workload model. The most up to date version of this workload model was recently unveiled at one of the most recent School Management Group meetings (10 February 2016). It was said at this meeting that the plan was to introduce this workload model in AY 2016-17. We look forward to the introduction of this plan.

Recommendation 8

The Review Panel **recommends** that the School put in place procedures for a formal induction event including provision of a handbook for all new staff across the School to introduce them to relevant School and University procedures [paragraph 5.3.3].

Action: Head of School

Response:

Effective early induction of new staff is critical in ensuring colleagues settle quickly into their new roles. Although comprehensive University-level induction processes exist the School of Humanities is aware that the most effective induction can take place at local level with line managers and immediate colleagues. The School has already implemented a number of initiatives to augment induction processes including; providing all managers with an induction checklist; School-level induction meetings with the Head of School; provision of mentors for all new Grade 7 and 8 R & T staff; signposting to appropriate convener for information about teaching practices. The School also has immediate plans to develop a School-specific Handbook and intends to canvas recent new-starts with as to the value of potential shape of further School and/or subject level induction.