

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 25 May 2007

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Report of the Review of the Department of Politics held on 14 March
2007**

Mr Jim Craig, Clerk to the Review Panel

June 2007

Review Panel

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A. Introduction

The Department of Politics in the Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences is based in the Adam Smith Building where all but the very large Level 1 classes are taught. An assessment of educational provision in Politics, conducted for the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council in 1996, judged quality overall to be 'Highly Satisfactory' and, in respect of 'the teaching and learning environment', 'learning resources', 'student support' and 'students' work' to be 'Excellent'. A Departmental Review conducted in 2001 recognised that this was, "a very strong Department with considerable strengths [including] ... excellent staff engagement with quality assurance [and] very solid commitment to the support and academic development of the student." The Department has also a fine record of research achievement having scored grade 5 in each of the last three Research Assessment Exercises.

Although there have been several changes in personnel since the 2001 review, the Departmental ethos that may be discerned from the brief description above appears to have survived in good health. The Department approached the DPTLA review in a positive and constructive manner, and its Self Evaluation Report (SER), which assisted the Review Panel greatly, was a model exercise in critical self-appraisal. By the end of the review the Panel was to conclude that the SER had been, perhaps, too self-critical, or that, in the two to three months since its drafting, the Department had satisfactorily resolved some of its own concerns.

In addition to the expected contributions to the MA and MA (Social Sciences) programmes at Levels 1 and 2 and Honours, the Department provides a 60 credit Level 3 course. The Department has also responded to the University's Learning and Teaching and Internationalisation Strategies by increasing PGT provision so that it now offers seven distinct MSc programmes.

In the course of its visit, the Review Panel met Professor Robert Paton, the Associate Dean representing Professor Burrows, Dr Barry O'Toole, Head of Department, and Professor Andrew Lockyer, past Head of Department. It met also a group of key staff (8), probationary staff (4), associate staff (4), taught postgraduate students (8) and undergraduates in two groups of 6 and 7. For the want of appropriate and available accommodation in the Adam Smith Building, these meetings were held in the adjacent Department of Urban Studies in Bute Gardens. The Panel was grateful to the Department of Urban Studies for making rooms available on this occasion.

B. Overall aims of the Department's provision

The SER provided a thoughtful and convincing set of four aims which articulated well with the University's mission and objectives. The third of these referred to the integration of teaching and research activities for the benefit of both students and staff. The Review Panel, conscious of conflicting demands on limited staff time, appreciated that this represented a considerable undertaking but, by the end of its meetings with students and staff, concluded that the Department continued to demonstrate a large measure of achievement of this objective. The other three aims were appropriately student centred, focusing more on the learning than the teaching experience, and on developing each student's potential for personal fulfilment and his or her capacity for making a positive contribution in society.

C.1 Undergraduate and Taught-Postgraduate Provision

C.1 Aim

The Review Panel was entirely satisfied with the aims of the Department's taught provision which appeared to sit comfortably with recently redrafted QAA benchmarks. From the documentation provided by the Department to accompany the SER the Panel was able to confirm the clarity with which these aims were set out for students across the whole range of provision.

The Panel was pleased to read in the SER how, in response to critical comment following the 2001 review, Honours and Masters teaching had been wholly decoupled. In their meeting with the Panel, postgraduate students described their programme as 'cosmopolitan' (sic) and taught with 'wide perspective'. They had different perceptions as to how far it represented a step change from undergraduate studies but some reported a significant difference in the quantity and difficulty of the material they were expected to master, and in the extent to which that material was critically examined.

Although the Review Panel appreciated the Department's aim to encourage a broad, thoughtful and imaginative approach to student learning, it was not convinced that all undergraduate students understood the objective or were ready to subscribe to it, and some criticised reading lists for not being clearly focused on relevant topics.

C.2 *Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)*

In its SER the Department expressed the view that it had not yet achieved all it wanted to in respect of ILOs but, even if more needed to be done, the Review Panel was impressed by the inclusion in the same passage of a very positive statement of intent with regard to course guides and their presentation of ILOs as the focus for all learning and teaching. And, despite the Department's self-criticism, the Panel took the view that the ILOs were generally written in accordance with University guidance, and were clearly presented in students' course documentation. The Department might take encouragement too from the fact that undergraduate students informed the Panel that the ILOs helped them select their courses because they gave a clear indication of content.

The Review Panel concurred with the view represented in the SER of the pivotal significance of ILOs, and offered the Department every encouragement in its drive to deliver this message to students. In doing so, the Panel recalled that some undergraduate students had pointed to an absence of focused reflection at the conclusion of taught courses, and had implied that such an exercise might be used to confirm attainment of ILOs.

C.3 *Assessment*

C3.1 Examinations v. alternative assessment forms

While all Honours assessment was formerly conducted in this Department, as elsewhere, by means of unseen examination, a weighting ratio of examination to coursework of 75:25 was now the norm, and some classes were moving in the direction of 50:50. The Head of Department confirmed to the Review Panel that course conveners were permitted to set this ratio for themselves on the basis of what provided the most appropriate means of determining achievement of ILOs. He suggested, however, that this criterion resulted in a bias towards examinations because of the relative importance attached to end of course achievement.

One convener who had reduced the unseen examination to 50% of the course summative assessment had introduced a requirement for students to keep a reflective journal. This innovation was consistent with a growing support for active and student-centred learning, although one member of staff who met the Review Panel took a more traditional view and questioned whether application of a particular learning technique should count for so much relative to the demonstration of what had actually been learned. It was acknowledged also that the journal was very time consuming to mark, and presented particular problems in terms of second marking. The Panel sought to explore the possibility of auditing the assessment by means of second marking only a sample of scripts or assignments. The Head of Department was reluctant to embrace this suggestion, however, which, he thought, might undermine the integrity of the assessment. He was concerned also to preserve a value equivalence among all Honours options.

C.3.2 Participation in tutorial groups

In several of its meetings the Review Panel discussed the reliability of the assessment of student participation in tutorial groups. Some students expressed concern about the consistency of marking achieved by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and staff acknowledged that the difficulty of achieving an entirely transparent and objective assessment meant that the contribution this mark could be allowed to make to the assessment overall must necessarily be limited. The Panel was, however, impressed by the efforts made by the Department to ensure a high and consistent level of performance from GTAs (see C.6.4 below) and commended in principle the

Department's efforts to encourage students and reward their appropriate participation in tutorials.

C.3.3 Dissertation oral

The Review Panel discussed with staff the oral examination of the Honours dissertation. The innovation was commended by the Panel as an example of good practice worthy of consideration by other departments. In response to the Panel's observation that, at 20%, the share of the assessment score attributed to the presentation and defence of the dissertation might be thought by some to be high, the Head of Department pointed out that even at this weight it contributed only 2.5% of the overall Honours assessment. He readily conceded that this aspect of the assessment was time consuming but it had the great virtue of revealing whether the candidate was capable of articulating ideas and defending them orally. The Panel was reminded that students in the Department are advised from the beginning of their careers that they will be assessed on their oral performance, and that in developing these skills they cultivate an important asset, not least in the eyes of graduate employers.

C.3.4 Honours classification

The Review Panel explored with staff in the Department the spread of Honours classification outcomes – surprisingly light at the top end - and the possibility of this being a consequence of double blind marking. Further investigation revealed, however, a lack of persuasive evidence that Politics Joint Honours graduating students fared much better than those completing a Single Honours programme – the percentages over the past six years obtaining Firsts being 11% and 9% respectively. The Head of Department confirmed that, at the end of each academic session, there was a thorough review of assessment results on a course by course basis, and that the outcome of this review informed planning for the succeeding year.

C.3.5 Plagiarism

The offence of plagiarism – its prevention and detection - in written course assignments was discussed only briefly with staff but the Review Panel was persuaded that the Department was committed to implementing University policy in this area. Undergraduate students, however, seemed to express a fear of offending by accident and told members of the Panel that they would like a class session on the subject. Although course documentation was found to include statements of the seriousness of the offence, and to make reference to University policy in the Calendar, the Department appeared to offer less guidance than some. The Level 1A Course Guide referred students to the booklet *Studying Politics* but the copy of this received by the Panel appeared to contain no explicit mention of plagiarism.

C.3.6 Formative assessment

One of the themes in much of what the Review Panel heard from students at all levels was that the delivery of formative assessment failed to match expectations. This matter was inevitably linked to the guidance in essay writing that students received. While one issue was the nature of the feedback, students were concerned also with who delivered it and when. Although the Panel heard Senior Honours students say they got essays back in two weeks, the experience of some in Junior Honours was that they might wait for up to eight weeks. Postgraduate students expressed some impatience with the time taken – up to six weeks - for essays to be returned to them. One student said that an essay had been submitted on 8 January and (at 14 March) had not yet been returned. The Review Panel acknowledged that, in exceptional circumstances, the

return of a student's essay might be delayed beyond normally acceptable limits. It noted that the SER referred to the return of assessed work within four weeks of the submission deadline, but that this represented an objective rather than a commitment. It agreed to **recommend** that the Department consider whether the current guidelines were sufficiently effective, and whether it might be appropriate to introduce a limiting timeframe that would represent something closer to an absolute commitment. It also agreed that the Department should emphasise the advantage for students of essays being marked by two lecturers independently.

The Panel was aware that the Department invited Honours students to submit a draft dissertation for assessment, and that most students ignored the opportunity. Some students whom the Panel met thought it might be helpful if the Department published the invitation with greater emphasis on the advantages it afforded. Asked about making it compulsory, staff advised the Panel that they did not wish to place an additional and perhaps unnecessary burden on students but, more importantly, that it would be difficult to determine a fair and appropriate sanction for those students who did not submit a draft.

Many students seemed unsure of the quality of their performance in written work and, in particular, what they had to do to achieve the grades they wanted. Some undergraduates said they would be prepared to give up a tutorial for clear feedback on their essays, but indications were that what they wanted was not feedback in the abstract – the Panel heard it said that there was no point discussing the essay with a tutor who hadn't marked it - but a level of personal dialogue with the marker. In their meeting with the Panel, staff described the guidance that was given to students in essay writing, the notes on structured argumentation that were provided to Level 1 students, and the tutorial session that was given over to this subject. The Panel discussed this guidance with students and discovered that what they appeared to be looking for was not help in such mechanical issues but indication of the required degree of originality and intellectual level of the content. Staff meanwhile had expressed concern not to deliver what might be interpreted as a model answer.

It was not an area in which the Panel felt confident that it fully understood the problem – by no means unique to this Department. The fact that students are asked to submit fewer essays and are warned of the seriousness of passing off the thoughts of others as their own, may increase their difficulties. The Panel agreed that student understanding of what was required of them might be improved considerably if time could be found for one of the staff who had marked a student's essay to return that essay to the student individually, and **recommended** that the Department be asked to adopt such practice, at least at Level 2 and above, as a matter of course.

C.3.7 Code of Assessment

The Department had indicated that its adoption of the University's Code of Assessment had been straightforward, and reference was made in the SER to the recent addition of two further bands within Grade A to encourage use of that grade when justified. The Review Panel was concerned, however, to discover evidence of 'marking out of 22', a practice which was likely to cause confusion obstruct clear understanding of criteria based assessment. The Panel **recommended** that the notes on assessment which were included in course guides should be amended to focus on the grades (divided into bands) and their correspondence with the verbal descriptions of performance relative to ILOs; and that they should make clear that the numerals in the scale of 1 to 22 are used only as a tool for aggregating discrete assessment results.

C.3.8 Political bias

It was perhaps inevitable that, in a subject such as Politics, a reference to political bias would have been encountered. An overseas MSc student took the opportunity to report to the Review Panel some dissatisfaction with the assessment of an essay which had been marked down, it was alleged, because the student and marker surveyed the subject from fundamentally different standpoints. While the Panel heard no other such complaints and, having been impressed by the scrupulousness of assessment procedures, was confident that the final outcome would be just and appropriate, it recognised that this was an area in which the Department would have to remain vigilant, perhaps, for assessment purposes, pairing experts with contrasting views in a given subject area.

C.4 *Curriculum Design and Content*

C.4.1 Honours provision

After reviewing the curriculum content from the documentation provided to it, the Review Panel had discussed the absence of opportunities for students to study Middle Eastern or African politics. The Head of Department responded that, in the past, recruitment advertisements had often included reference to an interest in these fields. Such advertisements had, however, covered a wide spectrum of research interests, and the Department had typically sought to appoint the strongest candidate without reference to the specialisms that he or she might have to offer. While it was acknowledged that a case could be made for a more focused appointment, certainly in Middle Eastern politics, the external member of the Panel expressed the view that there was often virtue in consolidation around existing areas of expertise. The Panel noted that two Honours options – *Institutions, Ideology and Power* and *Scottish Politics* – were currently taught exclusively by associate staff. In response to the suggestion that someone might be recruited specifically to teach Middle Eastern politics, the Head of Department observed that the curriculum was already fairly broad, with all professors teaching in their own fields in Levels 1 and 2.

The Department reported that a certain amount of course rotation increased further the number of options available to students. The Review Panel explored this - with its implications for progression and classes mixing students in their third and fourth years of study – without discovering evidence that it created any difficulties. The Panel was advised that the maximum number of students permitted to enrol on an Honours option in any year was 40 although, when splitting classes was not possible, numbers might have to be capped at 25. The Review Panel commended the Department for the breadth of Honours options provided.

The Review Panel had noted the suggestion in an External Examiner's report that the curriculum might have included more contemporary political philosophy. The Head of Department indicated some surprise that this observation had been made. Although there was no longer a compulsory paper in analytical political theory, a theoretical foundation was laid at Levels 1 and 2 and there were three Honours options in different aspects of political theory. The Panel was persuaded that the question had been adequately answered, and the possibility it had thought to explore of the Department inviting the Department of Philosophy to contribute to Honours teaching was not pursued.

C.4.2 Sub-Honours provision

The Review Panel agreed that the Department should be commended for the extent to which, even at Levels 1 and 2, students are exposed to current research activity in lectures given by the most senior members of staff. Students told the Panel that they

found the experience rewarding. They said also that they found the second semester of Level 1 more challenging than the first, but full of interest.

The Department's SER had discussed the size of Level 1 tutorial groups and the frequency of meetings, and the Review Panel was conscious of the strains imposed by increased student numbers. It agreed with the Department that it would be desirable to reduce the number of students in each group (currently averaging 13.5) but concurred with its decision that it was more important to retain meetings on a weekly basis.

The Review Panel was conscious of the fact that most departments made no special provision for Level 3 non-Honours students, and that Politics was exceptional in offering a 60 credits course at this level. The Panel took the view that the Department was justified in taking some pride in this, and congratulated it for allowing some measure of progression for Level 2 students who, for whatever reason, were unwilling or unable to proceed to Honours.

C.4.3 Politics General

Assessment in the new Politics General course reverses the trend to mixed essay-exam summative assessment by relying exclusively on end of course unseen examination. The Review Panel discussed with staff both the rationale underpinning the course and the lack of enthusiasm for it expressed by some students. The Panel had been favourably impressed by the Department's intention that this course "should encourage students to see the study of Politics in a broad perspective and to think in terms of the overall aims and ILOs of the Department's provision at Honours." And its meetings with undergraduates revealed that not all of them were unhappy. The Head of Department conceded, however, as he had done in the SER, that many students did feel threatened by the open-endedness of the course, its lack of tightly defined content, and its novelty since this was the first year it had been offered. He indicated that changes in design and presentation would be introduced in session 2007-08 and that these changes would be informed partly by student performance in the current session, a performance which would be examined closely and with much interest.

C.4.4 Personal development planning

Although members of the Review Panel were generally impressed by the Department's sense of responsibility for its students' education in the widest sense, they discovered no evidence of students engaging consciously in personal development planning. Undergraduate students did report that employability issues had come up in tutorials, but they evidenced little awareness of the implementation of an employability strategy. Although it might be argued that developing skills is more important than thinking about doing so, a greater student awareness of attainment might both assist the process and encourage focus on personal development areas requiring particular attention. The Panel **recommended**, therefore, that the Department consider how it might incorporate a closer focus on personal development planning in its plans to increase student awareness of course learning outcomes.

C.4.5 Masters programmes

The Review Panel commended the Department for the energy with which it had responded to the University's 'Learning and Teaching' and 'Internationalisation' strategies with its considerably extended PGT provision. Among the comments of appreciation expressed by current postgraduate students was reference to the range of courses on offer. And a North American student who spoke of having already had enough of being taught US foreign policy from a US perspective referred to being glad to be where "things are going on." This had not, however, been achieved easily and the

Panel discussed with postgraduate students the timing of the Research Methods course, which some thought to have been delivered too late for best effect, and the advice on choice of dissertation topic which appeared to have come too close to the date by which that choice had had to be made. The Head of Department confirmed that this course would, in future, be delivered in the first semester.

Postgraduate students whom the Review Panel met appeared happy with the overall integration of courses in the programmes they were following, but several expressed disappointment that the International Security option had been removed from the International Politics MSc programme. The Head of Department acknowledged that this change to the programme – a result of changes in Departmental staffing – was unfortunate but not exceptional, and pointed out the wide range of alternative options available. The Panel was, however, concerned to be assured that, when a particular option might have had a significant bearing on attracting students to a programme, everything possible is done to ensure the availability of that option.

C.5 Student Recruitment, Support and Progression

C.5.1 Recruitment and induction

The Review Panel had been made aware from the documentation it had received that the number of students entering Politics at Level 1 had increased considerably and to a level with which the Department was uncomfortable. The SER expressed some frustration about a situation over which the Department had so little control and, in his meeting with the Panel, the Head of Department confirmed his suggestion that experience had perhaps now demonstrated a clear need to increase entry qualification requirements. The numbers recruited to the MSc programmes were very satisfactory but again there were concerns about entry standards – in this case the command of English possessed by some of the overseas applicants who were being accepted centrally. This matter is revisited below (C.5.2).

The SER had identified as a weakness of the Department its student induction procedures. The Review Panel found, however, that programme and course documentation was clear and presented detailed accounts of courses and administrative procedures as well as advice on such topics as study skills. But the SER continued that class sizes made it difficult at Level 1 to engage more pro-actively with the student body although the course conveners were examining ways in which induction might be improved.

C.5.2 Support

The Review Panel had learned from its external member that at the University of East Anglia the Honours dissertation was no longer a compulsory component of the curriculum because it was so demanding of weaker students. The Panel discussed the desirability of the dissertation being compulsory at some length with staff who indicated that six class meetings were organised during two weeks in May for students entering Junior Honours to prepare them for the dissertation and to address their questions and concerns. These meetings covered various research methods and included presentations from representatives of the Library and the Effective Learning Office. Meetings with supervisors to discuss research topics are followed by more focused meetings to agree titles and reading lists. For those students who had made insufficient progress over the summer, further meetings in October would be arranged to identify remedial work.

Honours students who met the Review Panel were enthusiastic about the approachability of staff, and staff-student relations appeared to be very good. At Level 1, GTAs appeared to contribute positively to developing the sense of integrated

community. Nevertheless, while there was evidence of a social dimension to teaching and learning relations, some students indicated an appetite for more, and wondered whether an informal meeting of tutorial groups at the beginning of the session would be a good thing. In discussion with the Review Panel the postgraduate students expressed themselves very satisfied with the level of communications they had with academic staff. The provision of feedback questionnaires and the PGT Class Representatives meeting with the Director of Graduate Studies appeared to work well and provided the Department with sound mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of its teaching and academic support.

The Review Panel explored the provision of support for international students with the group of postgraduates, and most indicated a broad level of satisfaction. A student from China, however, would have welcomed more support – this in the form of more small group work and assistance in bringing together for mutual support students from different programmes but from the same part of the world.

In the course of meetings with staff, the Review Panel was often reminded of the point made in the SER that “discussion, debate, dialectic” were “what Politics is about” and that “a high degree of proficiency” in English was required. In the section on student support, the SER referred to postgraduate recruitment being “largely out of the Department’s hands” and to there being “particular problems in terms of language,” problems with which the Department was not equipped to cope. The point was made that setting the required entry standard too low had a damaging effect on the quality of the learning experience delivered to other students, and threatened to compromise the principles supporting the Department’s learning and teaching strategy. The Panel sympathised with the Department’s position and **recommended** that the International Office should take steps to facilitate greater involvement of international students in the pre-session course.

The SER had informed the Review Panel that, in addition to a Faculty Adviser of Studies, each student was “allocated a personal tutor to whom recourse could be sought for advice, information and help.” The students who met the Panel spoke appreciatively of this arrangement and reported that they were able to express their own preferences, and that most seemed to obtain their first choice. The Panel commended the Department for this initiative.

C..6 The Effectiveness of Provision

C.6.1 Learning and teaching

Three members of the Review Panel met four probationary members of staff who reported their impression that good quality teaching was very important to the senior members of the Department, and that they had found this commitment to the students very helpful. It was gratifying also for the Panel to hear the quality of undergraduate teaching being given as one of the reasons why a postgraduate student had enrolled on an MSc programme. And such quality was not just a feature of the past – some postgraduate students describing their lecturers as ‘wonderful’.

The Review Panel was impressed by the process described in the SER for monitoring student participation even in Level 1 class meetings. The Panel’s encounters with students and GTAs confirmed that this was no mere expression of good intent. The Panel was persuaded that there existed a clear understanding that active participation by students was required, and GTAs not less than more experienced teachers were attentive to the extent and effectiveness of each member’s engagement with his or her group. In one of the meetings with undergraduates, members of the Panel heard from an appreciative student how the GTA leading her tutorial group had been observant and

conscientious enough both to see that she was struggling and then to take time to provide helpful and effective assistance.

In its meeting with staff, the Review Panel discussed an interesting development in the tutorial in which a small sub-group of students drew up a plan for an answer to a question set by the tutor. That plan was subsequently discussed and graded by the other students in the group. This method had the effect of encouraging students to engage more closely with the topic in hand, the exercise of assessment in particular encouraging critical consideration of the work.

C.6.2 Learning resources and their deployment: Associate staff

The Head of Department had advised the Review Panel that, from among the academic staff, only the single part time University Teacher was not being entered in the RAE. This commitment to research and the heavy teaching burden encouraged the Panel to suggest the recruitment of 'teaching only' staff as a means of protecting research time for research-active colleagues. In response, the Head of Department said that a move in this direction would be resisted by the Department as a whole where the Faculty's research excellence ethos was deeply entrenched.

The Review Panel explored the background to the appointment of the associate lecturers and the short-term, part-time, contractual arrangements made with them. The Head of Department explained that they were paid a fee typically in the range of £4,000 to £5,000 for delivering a defined course, this usually involving teaching once a week. The money for these fees came from research grants earned by the permanent staff who would otherwise have taught the courses concerned.

C.6.3 Learning resources and their deployment: Probationary staff

The SER had alerted members of the Review Panel to the possibility that it might find relations strained between established members of staff and the relatively large number of new and inexperienced staff who had recently joined the Department. Discussions on the day, not least with the probationary lecturers, dispersed such concerns entirely. While changes in teaching and assessment - such as the reflective journal and a diminished reliance on end of course examinations - may owe their introduction mainly to the enthusiasm for change of new staff, the Review Panel found no evidence of hostility or resentment on either side, and staff relations seemed very good. Each new member of staff had been assigned a mentor with whom the relationship was described by the Head of Department as 'informal'. The assimilation of new staff seemed to have been effective. In their first year probationary staff had typically¹ a weekly teaching workload of 4 hours rather than the 6.5 which was normal in the following years. It was, however, acknowledged that the step change to the higher figure in the second year might be rather demanding. Also, in their second or third years, probationary staff might be asked to join the ranks of Faculty Advisers of Studies.

While new staff had spoken kindly of the welcome they had received in the Department, they suggested to members of the Review Panel that they would have found a formal introduction to the University helpful. Members of the Panel were surprised that they seemed to have been unaware that this was provided by the Staff Development Service. The Panel learned from its representative of the Learning and Teaching Centre that the Department had negotiated reduced participation by its recently appointed probationers in the New Lecturer and Teacher Programme. The Panel observed that, in the event of such arrangements, care should be taken to ensure that its new staff are not denied opportunities to learn about the University and participate in formal and social staff induction events. Subsequent to the Review it was

¹ One of the probationers described a much heavier than normal workload in her first year as she had filled gaps left by two departing members of staff.

learned that a failure in the administration of e-mail addresses for new staff, which had affected staff more widely than in Politics alone, had contributed to the problem.

C.6.4 Learning resources and their deployment: GTAs

The Review Panel discussed the training and support provided to GTAs, and their familiarity with the subjects taught. It was impressed by efforts made by the Department to ensure that the teaching provided by the GTAs was of an appropriate standard, and noted that, “the conveners also monitor the tutors, including observing tutorial sessions, and make decisions about re-employment on the basis of questionnaires administered in each tutorial group specifically about the tutorials.” At the same time, in the meeting with associate staff, the Review Panel learned that GTAs were given less detailed advice about what should be covered in individual group meetings than was the case in some other departments, although this might be consistent with the advice given to GTAs that their tutorials should not develop into mini-lectures.

C.6.5 Learning resources and their deployment: Distribution of workload

The Head of Department acknowledged considerable inter-personal difference in the share of administrative burden carried by the professors in the Department. This, he argued, reflected individual strengths and weaknesses, and equilibrium was achieved through the distribution of second marking duties. It was acknowledged also that marking loads varied considerably and in accordance with class size. Although the Review Panel did not have an opportunity to examine a spreadsheet populated with actual data, it is understood that a workload model had been developed for retrospective comparison of staff inputs over an academic session. Given the complexity of the balance mechanism, the Panel **recommended** that this model be kept under review to ensure a consistently fair distribution of teaching and administrative responsibilities while maintaining the quality of these in a research intensive environment.

The Review Panel was aware from the SER of the extended range of additional responsibilities – examinations and quality assurance matters - currently being assumed by the Head of Department. The Panel was concerned both for the very heavy burden this imposed on the individual himself and for the potential loss to the Department of not having an officer to champion quality issues when these might require advocacy that was independent of other managerial considerations. The Head of Department readily conceded that the *status quo* was untenable and explained that it had arisen as a result of research absence, retirements and the appointment of inexperienced new staff. He indicated that he was temporarily covering the role of Assessment Officer because the colleague who was to have assumed these duties had recently accepted an appointment at another university. He had retained the quality assurance brief which he had held during his predecessor’s tenure as Head of Department, only in order to complete the preparations for the current review. He had taken account also of the impact of RAE preparations on the workloads of colleagues already heavy with teaching and administrative burdens. While the Panel applauded the Head of Department’s willingness to go yet another extra mile, it noted the presence of other experienced staff in the Department and maintained the view that this was a mile too many. It **recommended** that the responsibilities of assessment officer and quality assurance officer be delegated to other members of staff at the earliest opportunity.

C.6.6 Learning resources and their deployment: Buildings and materials

The SER was heavily critical of the teaching facilities available to the Department and described them as eminently unfit for purpose. In its meetings with undergraduates the

Review Panel heard several corroborating complaints and, in particular, students spoke about the lack of adequate heating in lecture room 415 in the Adam Smith Building. The Panel agreed that this matter required urgent action and should not be the subject of a formal recommendation in the usual way but should be raised separately by the Convener with the appropriate University authorities.

The Review Panel noted the critical comments expressed by the Head of Department in respect of the performance of Central Room Bookings. The Panel was, however, aware that this was a service area which had recently been subject to close examination.

The quality of Library provision was explored by the Review Panel in several of its meetings and in many respects, particularly that of the support provided by Library staff, it was reported to be very good. Some teaching staff, however, suggested that it was an area of relative weakness that the provision of prescribed reading was not more generous. As a result, some students were effectively required to study library materials against the clock.

D The Maintenance and Enhancement of Standards of Awards

The SER contained a detailed account of arrangements in the Department for assessment review which demonstrated explicit commitment to maintaining degree standards internally. The account and discussion indicated some of the difficulties inherent in maintaining something which meant different things to different people in different places, but it succeeded in demonstrating the Department's commitment to maintaining a clear perspective of its own position in both absolute and relative terms.

The question concerning the distribution of First Class degrees between Single and Joint Honours candidates has already been discussed (C.3.4 above). At around 10% overall over the last six years it was recognised that the Department was not generous relative to other institutions, and the Head of Department acknowledged that this point had been made more than once by External Examiners. Implying that the same might therefore not be said for the world at large, he said that the figures simply confirmed his own Department's commitment to the protection of standards.

E. The Maintenance and Assurance of Quality

At the end of 2006 the Department's Teaching Committee took the decision that Class Councils should meet more frequently (and earlier) and that the Department should be more pro-active in alerting students to the Student Representative Council's training arrangements. The SER reported that the intention of these reforms was to streamline the work of the Department and ensure more effective student input into that work. The Review Panel was impressed by the candour of this passage but not more so than by the attitude, convincingly presented, to the contribution that students might make. It noted that the Department "sought to build a relationship of trust between students and staff and [was] constantly seeking to improve communication with, and feedback from, the student body."

Discussions with students and staff on the day of the review confirmed the Panel's first impression that the Department was genuinely committed to engaging with students not just as the objects of teaching but as participants in the design of the learning experience. The Panel had received the minutes of Class Councils and the Staff/Student Representative Committee, and had noted a generally higher level of attendance than is often the case elsewhere. The occurrence on committee agendas of matters external to the Department, for example the Registry's timetabling of graduations, suggested that internal concerns were neither numerous nor serious enough to demand their exclusive attention. The Panel noted and commended the

Department for its preparation of a consultation paper for students outlining both the advantages and disadvantages of split diets of examinations.

The Review Panel noted also that recent Annual Course Monitoring Reports for Levels 1 and 2 indicated a marked improvement in student satisfaction ratings. The contents of student questionnaires on the performance of GTAs and associate lecturers were clearly taken very seriously by the Department.

The fact that the Department employs a number of associate lecturers to deliver discrete elements of teaching, and that several of these, some holding posts in other institutions, met members of the Review Panel provided a helpfully objective assessment of what was described as a dynamic department with impressive students. One lecturer who had experience of teaching in another department in this University spoke appreciatively of the support and guidance that Politics offered.

F. Enhancing the Student Learning Experience

The Department identified in this section of the SER, “engaging students beyond their instrumental prioritising of work to meet deadlines and in preparing for examinations”. It was clear to the Review Panel that students in this Department already benefited from the existence of the corporate ethos that was capable of generating such an aspiration.

The Review Panel was provided with all the course documentation prepared for students. This material was found to be of good quality and to have been helpfully produced to a standard format. The tone was straight forward – neither stentorian nor patronising.

While the student participation in councils and committees described in Section E might reasonably be expected to benefit all, it must be regarded as a particular boon for those students elected to Class Councils and the Staff/Student Representative Committee.

The history of the use and development of virtual learning environments in the Department was known to the Review Panel – its early adoption of *Moodle*, subsequent switch at the direction of the Faculty to what was widely regarded as an inferior product, and the imminent return to *Moodle*. Although some resentment was inevitable, staff seemed confident that the Department would soon have a VLE that would provide students with an enhanced learning experience.

G. Summary of Key Strengths and Areas to be Improved or Enhanced in relation to Learning and Teaching, and Conclusions and Recommendations

G.1 Key strengths

Among the key strengths listed by the Department in its SER appeared the following which the Review Panel firmly endorsed:

- the high degree of choice open to Honours and postgraduate students;
- the structure of the programme at undergraduate level in terms of progression;
- the engagement of all staff in teaching at all levels thus exposing the student body to research intensive teaching;
- the Level 3 provision;
- the oral examination of the dissertation;

- a commitment to encouraging a widening of student perspectives and the application of ideas beyond the context in which they were first encountered;
- the good relationship of staff with students at all levels.

To these the Panel would add the following:

- the effectiveness of quality control of teaching provided by GTAs;
- the stress laid upon student participation;
- the responsiveness of staff to students requiring assistance or support;
- awareness of the importance of ILOs in teaching, learning and assessment;
- the excellent *Staff Handbook*.

G.2 Areas to be improved or enhanced

The SER included also a fairly long list of areas for improvement, this following a statement of emphasis on the requirement for increased resources, particularly staff or the money with which to recruit staff. The present review is not, however, part of a resource allocation exercise, and the focus of this report must be on what has been done and what might be done with the resources available. Among the areas referred to in the SER as requiring improvement are several that the Panel would not have wished to include. The assimilation and support of probationary staff appeared to be very good and teething problems with the Politics General paper might have been inevitable and the Panel was confident that these would be resolved as a matter of course. The engagement of students “beyond their instrumental prioritising of work to meet deadlines and in preparing for examinations” is entirely laudable and the Panel would wish the Department every success though it noted the acknowledgement that this was related to class sizes and student lifestyles – the first being a resource matter and the second even further beyond the Department’s reach. Reference was also made to plagiarism and to development of *Moodle* pages, and with both of these the Panel concurred. The Panel wished also that attention be drawn to:

- reduction in time taken to return essays with assessment feedback to students;
- instruction for students that marking is conducted using grades aligned to descriptions of performance;
- extension of student participation to include personal development planning;
- requirement for a staff workload model.

G.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The Politics Department approached this review in a positive and constructive manner affording the Panel its full and ready cooperation. This was entirely consistent with its robust approach to quality assurance issues internally and its commitment to enhancing the learning experience of its students. While confirming the integrity of its academic standards it demonstrated a readiness to adopt non-traditional forms of learning and assessment, and its development of the Politics General compulsory component of the Honours curriculum, the importance attached to participation in Level 1 tutorials, and the weight attributed to the oral presentation and defence of the Honours dissertation considerably enriched the learning experience and the value of the degree.

The recommendations interspersed throughout this report and summarised below are made in the spirit of support and encouragement to the Department. They are ranked

below in order of priority and include references back to the sections from which they are derived.

Recommendation 1

The responsibilities of assessment officer and quality assurance officer be delegated to other members of staff in the Department at the earliest opportunity. [Section C.6.5]

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

Recommendation 2

The Department should consider whether the current guidelines governing return times for essays are sufficiently effective, and whether it might be appropriate to introduce a limiting timeframe that would represent something closer to a commitment to students. [Section C.3.6]

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

Recommendation 3

Students on Level 2 courses or above should be given the opportunity and encouragement to discuss the marking of their assignment with one of the markers. [Section C.3.6]

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

Recommendation 4

The notes on assessment which were included in course guides should be amended to focus on the grades (divided into bands) and their correspondence with the verbal descriptions of performance relative to ILOs; and that they should make clear that the numerals in the scale of 1 to 22 are used only as a tool for aggregating discrete assessment results. [Section C.3.7]

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

Recommendation 5

The Department consider how it might incorporate a closer focus on personal development planning in its plans to increase student awareness of course learning outcomes. [Section C.4.4]

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

Recommendation 6

The Department should continue its efforts to develop a useful workload model capable of demonstrating where adjustments are required to achieve a fair distribution of teaching and administrative responsibilities while maintaining the quality of these in a research intensive environment. [Section C. 6.5]

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

Recommendation 7

The International Office should take steps to facilitate greater involvement of international students in the pre-session course. [Section C. 5.2]

For the attention of the **International Office**

Prepared by: Janet Fleming, Senate Office

Last modified on: Friday 15 June 2007