**UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN**

QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

**INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW OF THE SCHOOL OF MEDICAL SCIENCES**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

Panel Visit: Wednesday 15 and Thursday 16 February 2012

This summary is extracted from the full report of the Internal Teaching Review of the School of Medical Sciences following the review carried out in February 2012. It includes the Panel’s overall impressions of the provision, a record of the Panel’s commendations and recommendations, the Panel’s conclusions and a list of the programmes which were revalidated.

**A. COMMENDABLE FEATURES**

*(Numbers refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel’s full report.)*

The Panel **commended** the following aspects of the School’s provision:

**3 Staffing**

3.1 The Panel **commended** the School on the enthusiasm and commitment of its staff. In particular, the supportive environment provided by staff was commented on particularly by senior students within the School.

3.2 The Panel **commended** the School in addressing staff shortages due to early retirement and voluntary severance by balancing teaching loads so that the shortages did not impact on the delivery of teaching.

3.6 The Panel noted the School’s initiatives in appointing Teaching Fellows to permanent posts, and **commended** the School on highlighting the equal value of the University’s teaching fellow career path and of encouraging such staff to follow this route.

3.8 The Panel **commended** the administrative staff for their cohesive nature, collective approach to the day-to-day running of administrative duties, and of their continuing efforts to make the sometimes still disparate processes more harmonized.

3.10 The Panel **commended** the Laboratory Technicians on their flexibility in working outwith the normal 9–5 day to accommodate the increasingly tight turnaround times for laboratory session change-overs and on finding workable solutions to the issues raised by running practicals with limited resources on a split site.

3.11 Laboratory Technicians at King’s Campus were often required to advise students in an informal capacity when members of teaching staff were not available; often giving advice directly or liaising for the student by phoning the member of staff. The Panel **commended** the Laboratory Technicians for assisting the students in this way.

3.12 The Panel **commended** all School staff on their good working relationships with the staff of the School of Biological Sciences and the School of Medicine and Dentistry.

3.14 The Panel **commended** the refurbishment programme of laboratory equipment that had taken place some years ago.

**4 School Organisation**

4.12 The Panel **commended** the commitment and resourcefulness of the School’s staff in travelling between sites, while acknowledging that this was time-consuming.

4.14 The Panel **commended** the commitment of the Advisers of Study to being as flexible as possible in meeting students.

**5 Course and Programme Design, Accessibility and Approval**

5.4 The Panel noted the particular requirements (e.g. within laboratories) that often needed to be put in place for students with disabilities. It **commended** the pro-active approach the School took in preparation for students coming in with known specific disabilities.

**6 Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

6.1 The Panel **commended** the School’s persistence in using the Public Response System (PRS) successfully.

6.2 The Panel **commended** the School on providing PRS handsets to all students at Level 1.

6.4 The Panel **commended** the School on its Research Skills course taught at Level 2.

6.5 The Panel **commended** the School on its General Paper as a test of a student’s originality in arguing a solution to a complex cross-discipline problem and of proving themselves as having the attributes most employers would look for.

6.7 The Panel noted the School’s use of a ranking system in order to allocate Honours projects to students, and **commended** the School on now having a system that makes the criteria for allocation of projects transparent.

6.8 The Panel **commended** the School on its allocation of Personal Tutors at Levels 3 and 4 in Genetics and Immunology.

6.9 The Panel **commended** the School’s use of blind double-marking of course work and examination scripts at Honours (Level 4).

**7 Course and Programme Monitoring and Review**

7.1 The Panel noted the School’s intention to review the range and number of its programmes and **commended** the School for reviewing its provision with a view to sustainability and succession planning.

7.2 The Panel noted the School’s response to the sometimes harsh criticism of external examiners and **commended** the School on its action to make changes to programmes and courses as a result of this feedback.

**10 Personal development and employability**

10.1 The Panel **commended** the School’s MSci programme, particularly its structure, the preparation of placement students, and the level of continued follow-up and support for students on placement.

**12 Staff Training and Educational Development**

12.1 The Panel **commended** the College on the Trainee Technician initiative.

12.2 The Panel noted the positive feedback from staff on the induction and training opportunities offered by the University and **commended** the Centre for Teaching and Learning, in particular for the PgCert HELT and for the short courses that were run at repeated times throughout the year.

**13 Student involvement in quality processes**

13.6 The Panel **commended** the commitment of the School in encouraging informal student feedback through various mechanisms.

**15 Student support, retention and progression**

15.1 The Panel **commended** the commitment of staff to pastoral support, and of their efforts to refer students to the appropriate professional support services within the University as appropriate.

15.2 The Panel **commended** the School for its efforts in improving the retention of students, especially at Level 3.

15.6 The Panel recognised the School’s disadvantage in being able to engender a common sense of belonging to the School amongst students given the split site, and **commended** the efforts made by the School to reduce the impact of the split site by providing induction sessions for Level 3 students to familiarise them with the Foresterhill campus.

15.7 The Panel **commended** the allocation to students of Advisers of Studies who were themselves specialists in the area of specialisation of the students from Level 3.

**B. RECOMMENDATIONS**

*(Numbers refer to the relevant paragraph of the Panel’s full report.)*

The Panel invites the School to consider the recommendations in this section and asks that the Head of School and the Head of College, consulting with colleagues as appropriate, provide an agreed response to each.

The Panel **recommended** to the School:

**3 Staffing**

3.5 The Panel welcomed the advertisement of posts and **recommended** the College ensure appointments were made in time for the start of the new academic year to ensure courses in Genetics could continue to be delivered.

3.14 The Panel **recommended** that funds be sought to allow the refurbishment programme of laboratory equipment to continue.

**4 School Organisation**

4.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the sustainability of the distribution of administrative and key roles. While it is acknowledged that staff may choose to take on extra responsibilities, it was not clear how broad a range of staff were offered key roles.

4.4 The Panel **recommended** the School publicise to all Laboratory Technician staff that they had a route to representation on certain School committees, and that it urge these staff to make use of that mechanism.

4.6 The Panel **recommended** that students be represented on all relevant School Committees, if necessary having a ‘reserved agenda’.

4.8 The Panel noted that minutes of School Committees were not made publically available and **recommended** that they were posted on the School’s web pages and that staff and students were made aware of this.

4.10 The Panel **recommended** that the School ensure full and detailed minutes of all Committees are kept in order to ensure the recording of all important decisions and the arguments leading to such decisions.

4.14 Some students had commented on the difficulty in seeing their Adviser quickly enough. The Panel reminded the Advisers of the bookable meeting facilities available at King’s campus and **recommended** they make use of these in the short term.

4.16 The Panel **recommended** that the School identify a location for a staff base at King’s for meetings with students and for a staff hot-desk area for working in-between sessions.

4.18 The Panel **recommended** that the School, together with the College, review the sustainability of the split-site and work towards alleviating the current problems. This should certainly address the need to locate all Level 3 teaching at a single site.

4.20 The Panel **recommended** the University reinstate the more frequent shuttle minibus and negotiate a discounted fare for students on the free-to-staff service bus.

4.22 The Panel **recommended** that the School, the Timetabling Team and the School of Medicine and Dentistry consider whether there were more efficient approaches to the use of the Suttie Centre facilities, especially the larger lecture theatres.

**6 Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

6.1 The Panel **recommended** the School work closely with the Audio-Visual Unit and Department of Information Technology (DIT) to improve the reliability of the PRS system.

6.2 Based on student feedback, the Panel **recommended** the School extend the provision of PRS handsets to students at Level 2.

6.8 The Panel re**commended** the School consider extending allocation of Personal Tutors at Levels 3 and 4 to disciplines other than Genetics and Immunology.

6.10 The Panel **recommended** that the School undertake discussion about lowering the barrier to honours from CAS 12 to CAS 9, looking at the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, and that the School provide, as part of the 1-year follow-up report, the arguments leading to and justifying their conclusion, whatever that conclusion might be.

6.12 The Panel **recommended** the School review its use of the ‘School Qualifying Exam’ in order to enter Honours and, if it is to be retained, the Panel **recommended** that the criteria as to which students were offered the opportunity to sit the exam were made transparent.

6.13 The Panel **recommended** the School consider introducing anonymity to its examination boards, so as to eliminate any conscious or unconscious bias to the decisions made about borderline students and mitigating circumstances in particular.

6.14 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the practice of using external examiners to arbitrate classification of borderline students by way of *viva voce* examination, and that, in its 1-year follow-up report, provide a justification of its decision, whatever that might be.

6.16 The Panel **recommended** the School review the elements of assessment in light of the requirements of CRef, in particular to reference the number of elements of assessment in each course to the number of credits, so as to make the process transparent and workable.

**7 Course and Programme Monitoring and Review**

7.1 The Panel noted the School’s intention to review the range and number of its programmes. The Panel **recommended** that all aspects of the review should be recorded formally through minuted meetings and decisions.

7.2 The Panel noted the School’s response to the sometimes harsh criticism of external examiners and on their action to make changes to programmes and courses as a result of this feedback. However, the Panel **recommended** that this action was always discussed formally by the SETC and recorded in the minutes of that committee

**8 Academic standards and the academic infrastructure**

8.1 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the use of a 1-year Honours programme, reviewing the weighting of Level 3 to Level 4 in the Honours classification, taking into account the views of students, and that the School provide, as part of their 1-year follow-up report, the arguments leading to and justifying their conclusion, whatever that conclusion might be.

8.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School consider within the discussion how a 2-year Honours programme be designed so as to allow intercalating medical students to participate in the Honours programme.

8.4 The Panel **recommended** that the College consider a single Joint Committee (involving Medicine and Dentistry and Medical Sciences) to facilitate an integrated approach to intercalation.

8.5 The Panel **recommended** that the School increase the exposure of staff to the Academic Quality Handbook and encourage familiarity with its content, guidelines and regulations.

**10 Personal development and employability**

10.3 The Panel noted the initiative in developing the ‘with’ Bio-Business programmes and **recommended** the School continue to develop this.

**12 Staff Training and Educational Development**

12.1 The Panel **recommended** the College monitor the Trainee Technician initiative this to ensure sufficient succession planning was in place.

12.3 The Panel **recommended** that the School review the training of appointed Demonstrators, ensuring that all demonstrators were aware of their responsibilities, and that those who were appointed were not just trained but also suited to the role.

**13 Student involvement in quality processes**

13.1 The Panel **recommended** the School consider involving a broader cross-spectrum of students in future reviews so as to better reflect the School’s provision.

13.4 The Panel **recommended**that the School hold SSLCs no later than 5 weeks into each half-session (following the AQH guideline).

13.5 The Panel **recommended** that the SSLC meetings be formally minuted and that these minutes should be made available to all students following the meeting.

13.6 The Panel noted the commitment of the School in encouraging informal student feedback though **recommended** that the School did not use this as a substitute for formal, anonymous and formally recorded feedback.

**14 Public information/management information**

14.1 The Panel noted that many of the School’s webpages were out-of-date or missing key public information such as the minutes of the School’s Committees and, while recognising that the School had during the course of the ITR become aware of unmaintained pages, **recommended** the School’s Webpages Co-ordinator work with DIT to get the webpages up-to-date.

**15 Student support, retention and progression**

15.2 The Panel noted the School’s efforts in improving the retention of students, though **recommended** that the School review the sustainability of relying heavily on one member of staff to provide the momentum for this.

15.5 The Panel had concerns that the step-up between Level 2 and Level 3 seemed to be too great and **recommended** the School review this as part of the discussions for introducing a 2-year Honours programme and for reducing the CAS 12 barrier to Honours.

**19 Quality enhancement and good practice**

19.1 The Panel **recommended** the School should involve a broader cross-spectrum of staff in future reviews so as to provide a more meaningful representation of the School’s practice.

**20 Impediments to quality enhancement**

20.1 The Panel noted from feedback that there were still very much ‘two schools’ and **recommended** the School work towards harmonizing the two parts, particularly as this split was recognized by both staff and students and was seen by some to be detrimental.

29.2 The Panel recognised the crucial place of timetabling in facilitating programme enhancement given the issues caused by the split site and limited suitable laboratory facilities and **recommended** the College and School be proactive in liaising with the Timetabling Team to ensure the issues were fully understood.

20.3 The Panel noted the recognition of some staff that the School might have to be more prescriptive in order to achieve more even class sizes in the laboratories, and **recommended** that the feasibility of doing this be discussed with the Timetabling Team.

20.4 The Panel had concerns that the CAS 12 barrier to honours and repeated comments by some staff that students not on track for a 2:1 or 1st class degree ‘should not really be at university’, could be having an adverse effect on quality enhancement. The Panel **recommended** the School consider this and the affect – whether conscious or otherwise – such comments might have on staff and students.

**22 Production and approval of self-evaluation document**

22.3 The Panel noted that [the writing of the SED and the staff presenting for interview at ITR] reflect the general position stated in 4.3, and **recommended** that the School should consider how administrative responsibilities could be more broadly distributed to prevent overload of a few individuals and to improve staff engagement.

22.5 The Panel **recommended** that a senior member of staff, who had been involved with the writing of the SED, be co-opted to the group within the University group reviewing the ITR process.

22.6 The Panel noted the comments from the School that the Reports received from Student Information Systems Team (SIST) were inaccurate and **recommended** that the School liaise with SIST to discuss where the errors lay and what type of reports might be more useful.

**C. CONCLUSIONS**

The Panel recommended unconditional revalidation.

**D. REVALIDATION OF PROGRAMMES**

The following programmes were revalidated.

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| BSc (Hons) Biochemistry |
| BSc (Hons) Biochemistry (Immunology) |
| BSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences (Anatomy) |
| BSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences (Developmental Biology) |
| BSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences (Molecular Biology) |
| BSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences (Pharmacology) |
| BSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences (Physiology) |
| BSc (Hons) Biotechnology |
| BSc (Hons) Genetics |
| BSc (Hons) Genetics (Immunology) |
| BSc (Hons) Human Embryology and Developmental Biology |
| BSc (Hons) Immunology |
| BSc (Hons) Immunology and Pharmacology |
| BSc (Hons) Microbiology & BSc (Hons) Molecular Microbiology |
| BSc (Hons) Molecular Biology |
| BSc (Hons) Neuroscience with Psychology |
| BSc (Hons) Pharmacology |
| BSc (Hons) Physiology |
| BSc (Hons) Sports and Exercise Science |
| BSc (Hons) Sports Studies (Exercise and Health) |