University of Aberdeen, Internal Teaching Review

**School of Modern Languages**

*Summary*

This document is extracted from the full report on the Internal Teaching Review of the School of Modern Languages conducted in March 2003. It includes the Panel's overall impressions of the School's provision and a record of the Panel's commendations and recommendations.

Overall Impressions

The Panel agreed that the School of Modern Languages (SML) delivers an impressive array of teaching in an effective and supportive learning environment. The Panel was confident that the SML’s provision continues at the level judged to be “Excellent” by Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) Reports published in 1997 (French) and 1998 (German and Spanish) and that the SML deserves its high placing in media league tables. Teaching is closely informed by the Languages Benchmark Statement, and the range of courses delivered compares favourably with those on offer elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The Panel was satisfied that the SML performs extremely well in its teaching, particularly so given the small size of the School and the resources available to it. This favourable impression was supported by enthusiastic reports from those students whom the Panel interviewed. Accordingly, the Panel:

* confirmed that the standards of the School’s teaching are ***appropriate***;
* rated the overall quality of the School’s provision as ***commendable***, and identified several aspects that were ***exemplary***.

The Panel was impressed by the SML’s commitment to teaching quality and the enhancement of its students’ learning. This was firmly demonstrated by the thoroughness of the Programme Specifications and Curriculum Maps, evidence of important changes made since the 1997 and 1998 TQA exercises, and recent External Examiners' reports. The Panel's discussions with staff and students provided further support, so that the Panel:

* expressed ***broad confidence*** in the procedures used by the School to monitor academic standards and to inform its policy of ongoing quality enhancement.

The Panel did feel, however, that the documentation produced specifically for the Internal Teaching Review tended to play down the School's achievements. Parts of the documentation, including the Programme Review Reports, were largely descriptive rather than evaluative, and reactive rather than proactive. The School rightly mentioned past accolades, but appeared reticent about supporting these with reference to its contemporary activities and future plans.

The Panel saw the SML’s commitment to teaching beginners and providing a general language education service to the wider University community as a major strength of its provision. This commitment is particularly impressive given the heavy demands on staff time and the more obvious attractions of teaching specialist Honours classes and undertaking research.

The Panel accepted the SML’s claim that the major obstacle to further enhancement of teaching quality was the heavy demands – from teaching, administration and research – made of staff. The Panel noted the extra teaching and administrative loads associated with the provision of five-year degree programmes. It is ***commendable*** that the staff are willing to sustain the level of effort required. However, the Panel was less ready to accept that the only way to improve this situation is for the SML to increase its level of staffing. The Panel agreed that the SML is seriously under-staffed for the teaching load it presently carries, but – given the ubiquity of resource constraints in higher education – the Panel suggested that the SML should consider adjustments to its curricula and teaching methods as alternative ways of easing the burden imposed on staff.

The Panel found encouraging signs that the School had started to operate effectively as a single entity. New staff spoke of a firm sense of School identity and saw clear benefits in the common organisational structure. The Panel was impressed by the initial efforts to introduce uniformity of educational provision across the School, noting with approval the broad match of expectations, methods of teaching and assessment, and learning outcomes across all four language areas. Features such as a common format for Departmental Handbooks, and a common policy on progression at Levels 3 and 4 represent significant developments. As the School continues to evolve, it is important for it to build on these early achievements, extending best practice (e.g. careers advice in French, peer assessment of teaching in Hispanic Studies and the monitoring of marking done by new staff in German) to cover all Departments. The Panel was also of the opinion that scope exists to enhance the planning and organisation of teaching at the level of the School, notably by widening the remit of the School Teaching and Learning Committee to give it wider responsibility for all aspects of teaching design and quality enhancement.

A major strength of the School is the friendly and supportive environment it provides. The consistently conscientious attitude of staff to matters of student support, the enthusiasm of junior staff and the Language and Teaching Assistants, and a vibrant programme of extra-curricular activities all make important contributions. The happy and encouraging atmosphere of the School is reflected in, and reinforced by, the high levels of satisfaction amongst its students.

**Commendable Features**

*Note: numbers in brackets indicate the relevant paragraph of the Panel's full Report.*

The Panel commended the following aspects of the School's provision:

* its wide range of provision (1.6)
* its delivery of a high quality education tailored to the diverse needs of individual students (2.1)
* its commitment to teaching beginners (2.3)
* the efforts made by its staff to deliver the present quality and quantity of teaching (3.2)
* the commitment and enthusiasm of the School’s younger staff (3.5)
* its efforts to introduce uniformity of educational provision across the School (4.1)
* its sympathetic and proactively supportive attitude towards its disabled students (5.3)
* its detailed CAS descriptors, differentiated by level and type of assessment (6.2)
* its innovative and comprehensive use of C&IT at all levels of the curriculum (6.4)
* the importance it attached to the Year Abroad (6.5)
* the punctual marking and return of coursework (6.6)
* the extra-curricular opportunities for students to enhance their appreciation of the languages and cultures they were studying (6.6)
* the ***exemplary*** nature of many of the School's teaching, learning and assessment practices, as recognised by its External Examiners (6.9)
* the widespread use of programme or course aims and learning outcomes in the documentation distributed to students (8.5)
* its consistent emphasis on the vocational and transferable skills aspects of a languages education (9.1)
* the wide range of outside contacts its staff have cultivated (10.2)
* its attitude towards staff induction, training and development (11.1)
* its ***exemplary*** treatment of new staff (11.3)
* the German Department’s practice of blind-double marking all work assessed by new staff to provide support and to ensure consistency of standards (11.5)
* Hispanic Studies’ staff peer assessment scheme (11.6)
* the close interest the School takes in the welfare and academic progress of its students; several aspects of the School's support practices were considered to be ***exemplary*** (14.1)
* the Celtic Department's efforts in promoting its courses to schools in the Gaidhealtachd (15.2)

**Recommendations**

*The Panel invites the School to consider the following recommendations, and asks that the Head of School and the Head of College provide an agreed response to each.*

The Panel recommended that the School:

**Range of Provision**

* consider further rationalisation of its range of course choices as a possible way to reduce pressures on staff (1.6)

**Staffing**

* consider more explicitly how it might seek to fill gaps in its teaching profile, making use of new appointments or adjusting existing teaching as expedient (3.3)
* consider a radical re-think of the existing curriculum and teaching methods to free-up staff time (3.4)

**School Organisation**

* continue to exploit its common features to rationalise the overall administrative load (4.4)
* the Panel ***strongly*** ***recommended*** that the School review the remit of its Teaching and Learning Committee (4.5)
* consider modification of its committee structure to reduce cross-membership and open up more direct channels of representation for all members of the School (4.6)

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

* consider, as part of its ongoing review of disabilities issues, the specific points raised in paragraph 5.3
* should take its *Teachability* review forward with reference to the existing documents produced by the School of Divinity, Religious Studies & Philosophy and the School of English & Film Studies (5.4)

**Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

* continue to monitor the reception of its new progression policies, and takes steps to consolidate the progress already made (6.3)

**Personal Development and Employability**

* endeavour to extend the successful programme of employer liaison and careers guidance measures from French to all areas of study (9.3)

**Professional Units and Other Bodies**

* review its present use of the Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) and the Learning & Teaching Support Network (LTSN) (10.3)

**Staff Training and Educational Development**

* extend the monitoring of marking by new staff, as currently practised in the German Department, to cover the entire School (11.5)

**Student Involvement in Quality Processes**

* review the encouragement given to students to put forward items for the agendas of SSLC meetings, and consider providing more explicit guidance to class representatives about how to facilitate this (12.3)
* take steps to improve access to class representatives in the large language classes taught by small group methods (12.4)
* introduce representation on the School Teaching and Learning Committee, and to consider allowing students to attend appropriate parts of Executive Committee meetings (12.5)

**Student Support, Retention and Progression**

* consider further expansion of its documentation to cover additional aspects of student participation and support in the University (14.4)