University of Aberdeen Internal
Teaching Review (ITR)

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY
Panel Visit: 24-25th April 2023

INTRODUCTION

1.1   The Internal Teaching Review (ITR) of the School of Psychology was undertaken in line with the University's published process and procedures, which are available on the University webpages: https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/internal-teaching-review-6112.php.

1.2   The School was asked to submit a Critical Analysis (CA) document which addressed the following key areas:

(i)   **School context:** to include student numbers, demographics and outcomes; highlight any areas of teaching and learning practices that are specific to the School and a summary of the School's response to the previous ITR.

(ii)   **Positive aspects of the School's teaching and learning:** to include examples of positive practice and particular strengths of the School as well as how this good practice is shared both within the School and beyond.

(iii)   **Challenges that have been encountered in the School's teaching and learning provision:** to include potential areas identified for improvement. It was advised that this should not focus solely on challenges associated with the COVID- 19 pandemic.

(iv)   **Future plans**: to include areas for development in the next few years, e.g. new course/programme developments and proposed partnerships if any.

1.3   The ITR Panel was comprised of:

Professor Michelle Pinard	School of Biological Sciences, Chair of the Review, Former member of the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC)
Ms. Faye Hendry	School of Education, Quality Assurance Committee (QAC)
Dr. Ross Macpherson	School of Natural and Computing Sciences, Senatus Academicus (Senate)
Miss Akua Agyeman	Vice-President for Education, Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA)
Dr. Helen Driscoll	External Subject Specialist, University of Sunderland
Dr. Paula Miles	External Subject Specialist, University of St. Andrews
Dr. Maxine Swingler	External Subject Specialist, University of Glasgow
Miss Kyra Lamont	Clerk, Academic Services
Miss Megan Smith	Assistant Clerk, Academic Services

1.4   The Panel considered the documentation provided by the School, by way of an evidence-based Critical Analysis (CA) as detailed in 1.2 above. In addition, prior to the visit to the School, internal members of the Panel were provided with access to the School's Quality Assurance (QA) repository, containing the School's annual monitoring materials (Annual Course and Annual Programme Reviews (ACR and APR)) in addition to Course Feedback Forms, Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) minutes, External Examiner Reports (EERs), and minutes pertaining to various School Committees. The External panel members were provided with a sample of the documentation. Consideration of this documentation, along with the School's submitted CA, enabled the Panel to identify key themes for further exploration.

1.5   The Panel conducted an in-person visit to the School of Psychology, William Guild Building. During the review, the panel met with a range of academic, management and support staff, as well as undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. This provided the Panel with a valuable insight into the School's pedagogic provision as well as how the School interacts with the wider University.

1.6   The following themes were identified prior to the visit and discussed with the School during the review:

(i)   **Delivery of Teaching and Learning**

(ii)   **Assessment and Feedback**

(iii)   **Student Voice & Student Experience**

(iv)   **Student Employability**

(v)   **Aberdeen 2040/Broader Strategy**

1.7   This report is split into three sections:

(i)   **Part A** gives the overall impressions of the teaching provision within the School, formed from the whole ITR process;

(ii)   **Part B** covers the outcome of various meetings held throughout the review, focusing on a small number of themes as outlined above. It also details the Pedagogic Partnership Session, which involved more free-form discussion;

(iii)   **Part C** details the School action plan which will form the basis of the annual follow- up reports on actions highlighted here.

PART A: OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

2.1   Overall, the Panel were impressed with the provision and quality of teaching provided by the School. The School's approach to marking, moderation and the provision of feedback is considered excellent.

2.2   The administrative team is commended for their collegiate way of working, for the support they provide to both staff and students, and particularly, for facilitating an effective approach to monitoring students at risk and the management of extension requests.

2.3   It is clear that there is a strong emphasis placed on employability within the School, evidenced by a variety of different events, including the use of seminars, workshops and careers fairs. The School's investment in internships for taught students is considered commendable.

2.4   The Panel were particularly impressed with the School's approach to widening participation as well as the improvement in student retention rates. It is pleasing to note that the School is placing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the forefront of the agenda, and the School was recently awarded the Silver Athena Swan Award.

PART B: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ENHANCEMENT; OUTCOMES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH STAFF AND THE PEDAGOGIC PARTNERSHIP SESSION

3.1   Theme: Delivery of Teaching and Learning

3.1.1   In terms of the delivery of teaching and learning, the Panel heard that the teaching team and scholarship staff meet on a weekly basis, during term-time, to discuss any issues that arise on their respective courses and to share any elements of good practice. The School advised that teaching staff can also take advantage of two full-day sessions provided by the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) which allows them to run through their teaching materials in the interests of consistency and to discuss any areas of concern. During the Quality Assurance (QA) meeting, the panel were advised that the School has the highest number of academic staff with certificates from the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and that HEA certification will be a requirement for all new teaching staff going-forward. It is understood that postgraduate research (PGR) students who assist with teaching are invited to shadow fellow teaching staff, and to attend weekly team-meetings in order to discuss their experiences. The Panel heard that PGR students are encouraged to undertake the two-day course provided by CAD to help prepare them for undertaking a teaching role. In addition, Level 1 course coordinators organise an in-house PGR teacher training session in conjunction with CAD. They arrange sessions that focus on how to teach small groups, how to mark and provide effective feedback, how to deal with student mental health issues, as well as a final end of year reflection on teaching session.

3.1.2   In terms of delivering and supporting On-Demand courses, it was noted that the School found the Centre for Academic Development to be very helpful. The School mentioned the importance of sitting down as a group to consider the structure of these courses and to determine how the relevant learning outcomes would be assessed. It was noted that the provision of these courses can be very resource intensive in terms of their development, as well as their maintenance, therefore, a clear business case must be demonstrated each time. However, the School explained that CAD had provided valuable support during the development of these online courses. The Panel noted that course coordinators make an effort to appear visible to students via various announcements and live sessions, and it is thought that the increased visibility from administrators has also been beneficial. The School advised that, at present, there is not an institutional policy outlining the support available to develop On-Demand courses which would be advantageous.

3.1.3   In terms of providing a more integrated approach to teaching and learning; the School advised that whilst they provide some multidisciplinary courses (e.g SX3504: Consciousness) they are difficult to administer. However, the School may consider enhancing these offerings in line with recommendations of the British Psychology Society (BPS). Students commented on the benefits of studying electives belonging to different disciplines during first and second year. For example, one of the students interviewed said that studying Philosophy in this manner helped them to broaden their overall perspective. It was clear to see that many students enjoyed lectures and tutorials with a focus on real-world applicability. However, there were a number of taught students who felt that the courses were more theoretical than applied.

3.1.4   Some of the postgraduate students advised that they would like to obtain more information regarding qualitative studies, in addition to quantitative methods, as these types of studies were

thought to be on the rise. During the Enhancement Focused Discussion with Postgraduate students, a request was made for greater information with regards to the use of coding and how this technology can be modified for use in different qualitative and quantitative experiments. PGR students enrolled on the MRes programme commented on the broad approach taken with regards to research methods. It is understood, however, that this helps to prepare them for further study and to conduct interdisciplinary research.

3.2   Theme: Assessment and Feedback

3.2.1   In relation to the marking of assessments and the provision feedback, it is clear that a number of initiatives have been implemented by the School to ensure a consistent approach. For example, the use of regular markers' meetings provides academic staff with the opportunity to discuss marking and feedback in more detail. The Panel heard that in order to manage student expectations, and aid transparency, the School publicizes important deadlines in the form of feedback calendars. It is understood that these deadlines are often met and markers meetings have supported staff well.

3.2.2   The School explained that their assessment procedures were reviewed in advance of the COVID-19 pandemic, with involvement from student representatives, and the School is considering a move away from the use of frequent Multi-choice Questionnaires (MCQs) – particularly as a graded measure. It was noted during the Support Staff Session that online examinations are preferred by exam administrators as it is easy to apply measures for additional support.

3.2.3   In terms of Academic Integrity and Academic Misconduct, it was noted by both the Panel and the School that this is an evolving situation; particularly, with regards to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was noted that various assessments may need to be adapted in light of recent developments in AI technology. Therefore, the School has established an Assessment and Feedback working group to address concerns surrounding Academic Integrity and the use of AI, and they will review assessments and provide school guidance on how best to revise current assignments. It was also noted that lessons could be designed to demonstrate the pitfalls of ChatGPT, for example, developing an exercise that involves comparing AI generated essays with traditional student submissions.

3.3   Theme: Student Voice & Student Experience

3.3.1   The School noted a large increase in the number of students with engagement issues, and an unprecedented increase in extension requests, as a result of the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Panel heard that course coordinators and administrators were initially struggling to manage the influx of student enquiries; however, this sparked a review of internal processes with regards to the monitoring of "at risk" students, and the management of extension requests. It was noted that following the introduction of a clear administrative process, subject to committee input, staff workload was reduced to a more manageable level, and students were provided with necessary support in a more efficient manner. In terms of On-Demand courses, the Panel heard that a number of these students have not obtained their completion certificates which may be linked to a lack of engagement with their university issued e-mail account as noted by administrative staff. It was also noted that these students do not tend to see themselves as part of the University to the same extent as those enrolled on degree programmes. It was noted by both the Panel and the School that this is an area for improvement in terms of student belonging and engagement.

3.3.2   The Panel acknowledged that the School has undertaken a large amount of work in relation to the provision of support, and the monitoring of student attendance, which has been reflected in the low non-continuation rates. It is reassuring that a proactive approach has been taken by the School to ensure that their students are supported before a crisis arises; for example, issuing student

communications explaining how students can engage with their feedback in order to improve their grades. The Panel also noted that course coordinators take the time to explain to students what will be required of them at different stages of their studies. It should be noted that the implementation of a zero credit "resilience building" course is considered an element of good practice by the Panel, and it is hoped the number of students enrolling on this course will continue to increase. In regard to postgraduate students, it is pleasing that a buddy system has been implemented for PhD students, and that there is an open-door policy between staff and PGR students so that they can seek guidance easily. A member of staff raised concerns regarding the lack of active telephone lines in the case of an emergency, however, it is understood that these remain active in lecture theatres.

3.3.3   In terms of supporting students in crisis, especially regarding mental health concerns, the Panel heard that the School has been working very closely with Student Support to ensure students receive the appropriate support. It is pleasing that the School liaises regularly with a named contact in Student Support in order to monitor and support the students who are engaged in their services. It was noted that this helps students as they are not required to keep repeating the same concerns or issues to multiple members of staff. It is also understood that the PGR School provides a variety of open sessions and materials, which includes a mental health guide, in order to support postgraduate students during their studies. It was noted that the use of lunchtime drop-in sessions for PGR students is a good form of community building as well as a source of informal support and guidance.

3.4   Theme: Student Employability

3.4.1   The School's focus on employability was clearly demonstrated throughout the review. The Panel heard that the Careers Fair was very well attended this year, and various workshops and seminars centered on employability have been made mandatory. The School commented that the University would benefit from an institutionally strong approach to employability with a view to improving the ranking for employability in national league tables. The School advised that whilst they have utilised their own innovative approach to the provision of internships, there is very little funding available to sustain this. The Panel commends the School for their efforts to improve student performance in terms of pre-interview screening tests which are noted as a significant barrier to employment. It is understood that the School has implemented a variety of these tests for fourth year undergraduate students to strengthen their employability prospects.

3.4.2   In addition to using Aberdeen Graduate Attributes to embed employability into the curriculum; it was pleasing to hear that there is an employability lead within the School who takes responsibility for the provision of internship programmes - including three full-time, eight week long Athena Swan scholarships. It is reassuring that the School recognises the importance of helping students to realise their practical skills in a professional setting, and the value of establishing networks with potential employers. The Panel also heard that after the success of the networking event, developed and run in collaboration with the company, E-Lead, the School is seeking to extend an invite to students of all levels with an interest in research skills going-forward.

3.5   Theme: Aberdeen2040/Broader Strategy

3.5.1   In terms of the University's continual commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, the Panel heard how the School has helped to improve the gender balance of students by ensuring their advertising campaigns have both male and female representation; and making sure that all open day stalls include a male member of staff. The increase in male students enrolled on MSc programmes is a testament to these efforts. In terms of increasing the gender balance at undergraduate level, the Panel were informed that staff had recently attended events at local Elementary Schools to discuss studying Psychology at the University of Aberdeen. With regards to the gender balance within the workplace, it is understood that the School of Psychology was the first Schools to obtain both Bronze and Silver

Athena Swan Awards within the University.

3.5.2   In terms of the delivery of teaching and learning, it is reassuring that every lecture is recorded and captioned in the interests of accessibility; and that work continues to decolonise the curriculum in line with the recommendations of the University's Decolonising the Curriculum Steering Group.

3.5.3   The Panel noted that the principle of interdisciplinary, a key component of the Aberdeen2040 strategy, is evidenced in the provision of interdisciplinary courses, such as SX3504: Consciousness, as well as the School's current portfolio of joint-degree programmes. The Panel also learned that academic staff had recently collaborated with the Business School in order to develop a new MSc programme entitled 'Business Consulting and Psychology' that will launch in September 2023. It is hoped that this will attract a number of postgraduate students who are interested in an inter-disciplinary approach, thereby helping to support the University's wider strategy.

3.6   Pedagogic Partnership Discussion (PPS)

3.6.1   The Pedagogic Partnership Session (PPS) provided staff and students from across all levels with the opportunity to engage in discussion regarding the various aspects of good practice within the School and suggest areas for improvement. The School is invited to consider the feedback contained within Appendix A to inform future practice - comments made by students are noted in pink whilst staff comments are noted in orange. Beneath are some of the key points raised during the PPS.

3.6.2   Student feedback was generally positive. The following points were raised in relation to the delivery of teaching and learning; students appreciated the real-life applicability of lectures and the ability to access recorded content; students advised that placing learning outcomes at the beginning or end of lectures helped aid their revision; students commented that L4 undergraduate poster sessions helped them to consolidate their learning in terms of dissertation topics; and they appreciated the inclusion of both internal and external speakers in seminars. It was noted that students found staff to be approachable, and that the School office was described as "really helpful" and "responsive" – noting the ability to sign-post where necessary. Students felt that the process for handling extension requests worked well, particularly for those with disabilities or mental health concerns, and that the School had created a supportive learning environment. In particular, L1-4 & MSc students appreciated the use of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) sessions.

3.6.3   In terms of PGR-specific feedback, postgraduate students noted the following points of good practice; the current PGR co-ordinator is considered approachable and supportive, PhD students are encouraged to be part of the community in a number of ways including attending social events, using communal facilities (e.g. shared kitchens), and being encouraged to speak up during lab meetings. It was noted that students found the mailing list established by the PGR School, known as "MyPGR", to significantly increase email traffic, therefore, its removal has been positively received. Students appreciated the use of training sessions organised by PhD reps (e.g thesis writing sessions). However, it was noted that PGR students would also appreciate the provision of independent pastoral support. Furthermore, PhD students requested greater interactions with the post-doctoral community, and they asked the School to provide clearer information about the nature of various events before issuing invitations. Going forward, students requested greater clarity in terms of expectations at PGR level, clearer assessment criteria for MRes and enhanced marking guidance for those involved in marking undergraduate assessments. Staff noted that there is the potential to standardize marking at this level and explained that current marking concerns are being addressed by the Assessment and Feedback Research Group which will report back to students next term.

3.6.4   In terms of areas for improvement, students noted the need to communicate course changes to taught students as soon as possible. It is understood that staffing is changeable and the School makes every effort to communicate with students as soon as practical when teaching is impacted. Staff recognised the students' appetite for further internships. However, staff expressed concern regarding the suggestion of a compulsory internships as individual circumstances may differ significantly between students making the provision of support challenging. Students requested more information regarding research careers (i.e. research assistant positions) and suggested increasing the weight of assessments associated with SONA Systems Research Management System (SONA) activities. UG students also flagged that some of the recommended reading is found behind a journal paywall and staff encouraged students to bring this to their attention so that this can be rectified. It was also noted that there are some inconsistencies regarding marking and feedback which is under consideration by staff and the Assessment and Feedback Research Group. Finally, students also noted that the re-sit and extension policies were somewhat confusing so this may benefit from further explanation.

3.6.5   The staff group reported a need to improve student engagement with research especially with regards to engaging with School in-person research via the SONA Systems Research Management System (SONA). The research committee have consulted with staff and students to review current practices and develop a strategy to engage with students more. Staff also advised that it may be beneficial to enhance the screening of PGT candidates and increase the support available for students who are entering via non-traditional routes (i.e direct entry to second year). Staff felt that academic writing and data management skills could benefit from improvement and noted the importance of enhancing language support for international students. Overall, academic staff felt that the School was doing well in terms of pedagogical research and their receptiveness to student feedback. The inclusion and integration of student representatives on various School committees, such as Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC), was noted as a particular strength. Staff felt that the current approach to monitoring "at risk" students was working well.

3.6.4   Both groups reported that staff were approachable and commented on the availability of student internships as a strength. Staff and students differed in their opinions with regards to communications; whilst staff felt having multiple channels for important information was a strength, students requested a more streamlined approach. Students also asked how they could toggle their notifications in terms of MyAberdeen for various courses. Both groups mentioned the level of pastoral support available; staff commented that the personal tutoring system was working well, however, students felt that tutors should be made available for PGR students in addition to PGT and UG. Both staff and students shared their perspectives on the current process for granting extensions; there were some students that felt that they would like clear guidance regarding the criteria for granting extensions, and called for greater support instead of extensions; students also requested that the word limit on extension applications is stopped as it restricts explanations; on the other hand, staff mentioned that there are still a high number of extensions being sought and noted the need to develop student resilience. It is noted that there are significant challenges present in terms of mental health and cost of living pressures which may impact students' personal circumstances.

PART C: SCHOOL ACTION PLAN

4.1   *Enhance the support for PGR students in the following areas:*

(i)   Expand the current investment in PGR employability, for example, by providing more opportunities for PGRs to be made aware of non-academic career options.

(ii)   Implement a system of pastoral support for PGRs and MRes students that is independent of the supervisory team, the School Programme Coordinator and the PGR Coordinator.

(iii)   Ensure that PGR students involved in teaching roles have undertaken the available training, for example, through the provision by Centre for Academic Development (CAD) or more bespoke training through the School.

(iv)   Provide greater opportunities for PGR students to engage with the post-doctoral community.
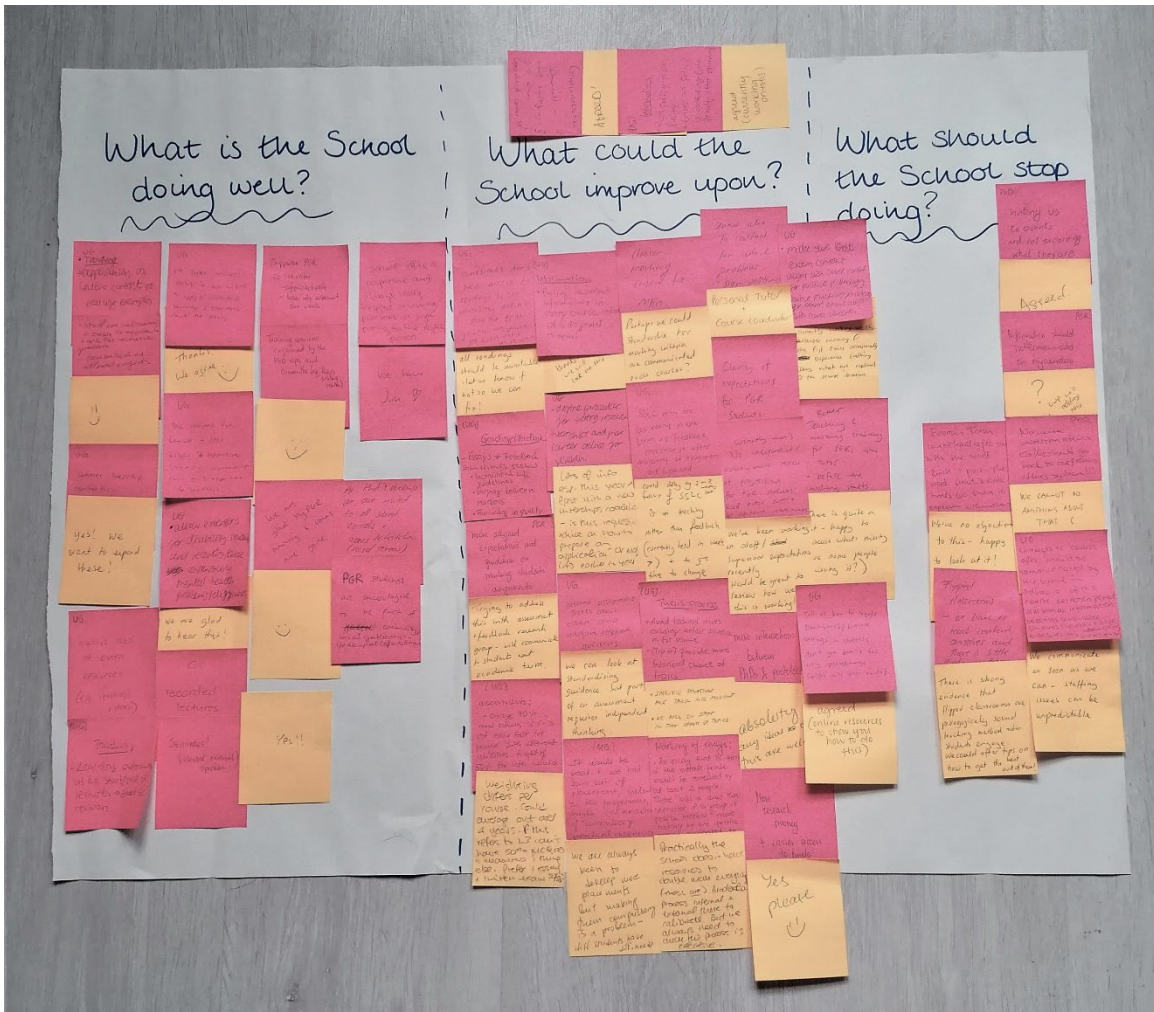
4.2   *Review Delivery of Teaching and Assessment:*

(i)   Clearly articulate the underlying pedagogy that underpins current approaches to teaching and learning, including the design of assessments.

(ii)   Continue to diversify the assessments, incorporating more examples of authentic assessment, and consider reviewing the use of online exams and MCQ assessments as appropriate.

(iii)   Review the current approach to addressing the benchmark statements – specifically, with regards to the integration and application of multiple perspectives, leading to an appreciation of their relevance to major societal and global issues.

4.3   *Improve Student Experience:*

(i)   Consider various ways in which student engagement and belonging can be enhanced for students enrolled on On-Demand programmes.

(ii)   Remove the word limit associated with extension requests as students have found this restrictive.

APPENDIX

i) Initial Student Response

ii) Initial Staff Response