University of Aberdeen, Internal Teaching Review

**Department of Biomedical Sciences**

*Summary*

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

Overall Impressions

The Panel was impressed by the Department’s positive attitude towards the review process, indicative of a well ordered and confident Department, with a firm commitment to teaching and open to the potential benefits of self-critical reflection and constructive commentary. This positive attitude came across strongly in the quality and physical form of the documentation submitted, and the Department’s willing co-operation with the Clerk prior to the Panel visit.

The Panel was generally impressed by the range, content and quality of the Department’s teaching. Interviews with students confirmed a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the learning experience on offer. It was also evident from aspects of the documentation submitted, comments from staff and students met by the Panel, and developments since the last Internal Teaching Review in 1996 and the 1997 Teaching Quality Assessment that the Department demonstrates a firm commitment to improvements of its teaching. Accordingly, the Panel:

* confirmed that the standards of the Department’s teaching are ***appropriate***;
* rated the overall quality of the Department’s provision as ***commendable***; and identified several aspects that are ***exemplary***;
* expressed ***broad confidence*** in the procedures used by the Department to monitor academic standards and to inform its policy of on-going quality enhancement.

The Panel noted the continuing strength of teaching provision in the established fields of biomedical science (principally physiology and pharmacology). The Panel was impressed by the thoroughness with which these programmes and courses were tied to external reference points, and by the emphasis on practical skills and research-related teaching, especially at Honours level. The Level 2 Anatomy practicals, which allow students direct experience of human cadaver dissection, were also singled out as a major strength in the BSc in Biomedical Sciences degree programmes.

The Panel noted the impressive growth of the sports degrees, both in terms of student numbers and academic stature. It is clear that sports education, once something of a fringe activity, is now a major component of the Department’s provision, popular with students and run by a young, enthusiastic and mostly research-active staff. It was also noted that aspects of the sports degrees were not as complete as they might be. It was suggested that the sports programmes might benefit from increased awareness of the Quality Assurance Agency’s Hospitality, Leisure, Sports and Tourism benchmark statement and various materials produced by the British Association for Sports & Exercise Science and the Nutrition Society. For the Sports & Exercise Science degree, further developments to widen the scope of the programme beyond its current core of physiology are desirable. The Panel noted that progress is under way in this direction. It is also recommended that the Department explore the possibility of greater articulation between the Sports & Exercise Science and the Sports Studies degree programmes, specifically to facilitate student transfer from Sports & Exercise Science to Sports Studies. The Panel also recognised that further enhancement of the sports provision was heavily reliant on the appointment of new staff to compensate for recent losses.

The Panel had anticipated that the geographical division of the Department’s activities would be an important issue. It was noted that repetitive travel between Foresterhill and Old Aberdeen was an inconvenience to staff, but the split campus seemed to have little impact on students, few of whom saw this as a problem. Students were full of praise for the efforts made by staff to make themselves available, by telephone, e-mail or in person. In the Panel’s opinion, the Department’s advisers and the two teaching technicians deserve special mention for their role in helping the Department maintain a presence in Old Aberdeen that transcends delivery of/attendance at classes. Nonetheless, the Panel was of the opinion that it would be advantageous for the Department to take steps to enhance its presence in Old Aberdeen.

The Panel was impressed by the attitude of teaching staff at all levels. Although it is difficult to find fault with the competence, enthusiasm and commitment of staff – clearly reflected in the broad quality of provision and high levels of student satisfaction – the Panel did note that the Department’s attitude towards staff training and career development was largely that of a hands-off approach. It was felt that the Department could do more to develop a coherent strategy for training on educational issues and career development, to include a more formal system of support for Teaching Fellows, and a greater commitment to training on the part of all staff.

Students repeatedly expressed satisfaction with their courses and the learning support provided by the Department, and commented favourably on the Department’s willingness to act on student feedback. However, the Panel formed the impression that the formal system of student representation in the Department made little contribution to processes of change. Except for those directly involved as members, those students interviewed showed only a limited awareness of the Staff-Student Liaison Committee, and students are not represented at present on either the Departmental Teaching Committee or the Industrial Liaison Committee. The Panel recommended that the Department review its student representation procedures to consolidate its achievements, and to comply with the new SHEFC guidelines.

**Commendable Features**

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

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

* its efforts in developing sports courses and programmes (1.2)
* its emphasis on research-led teaching (1.4)
* the overall emphasis given to the acquisition of skills (1.5)
* the scope of its teaching and aims of provision (2.1)
* its *Handbook for Teachers in Undergraduate Science Courses* (2.1, 4.2, 8.6)
* the enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism of all of its teaching-related staff (3.1)
* the effective organisation and activities of its Teaching Committee (4.1)
* the thorough use made of external reference points in the design of its biomedical science degree programmes (5.3)
* the thorough review of its provision for disabled students contained in the document “Developing an accessible curriculum for students with disabilities” (5.5)
* its efforts to enhance its teaching since the 1997 Teaching Quality Assessment of Aberdeen’s biological sciences provision (6.1)
* its innovatory and effective use of C&IT (6.2)
* second year students studying Anatomy as part of the BSc in Biomedical Sciences degrees gain first-hand experience of human cadaver dissection/prosection; the Panel considered this to be an ***exemplary*** feature of the BMS programmes (6.4)
* the collection of documentation to support teaching available on its attractive, easy to navigate, informative and comprehensive website (6.7)
* the thoroughness of its programme review reports (7.1)
* its initiative to survey the opinions of all final year Honours students (7.2)
* the thoroughness of its Programme Specifications and Curriculum Maps (8.1)
* the staff's high level of awareness of the Programme Specifications and Curriculum Maps (8.6)
* its intention to produce alternative versions of the Programme Specifications and Curriculum Maps in a more accessible, student-friendly style (8.7)
* its close working relationship with the University Careers & Appointments Service (9.2)
* its industrial placement scheme, and the associated opportunity for students to gain a City & Guilds personal development award, supported by an attractive and informative website that the Panel thought was ***exemplary*** (9.3)
* its success in obtaining funding from the Pharmacological Society for the *in vivo* experimentation Honours project initiative (10.2)
* the positive attitude of the younger staff towards staff development activities (11.2)
* the enthusiasm and all-round commitment of the Teaching Technicians to the Department's teaching, learning and (informal) support activities (14.2)
* the professionalism and commitment of the Advisers of Study , and their admirable sense of the scope and limitations of their job (14.4)
* its activities with schools to encourage interest in the biomedical sciences (15.3)

**Recommendations**

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

The Panel recommended that the Department:

**Range of Provision**

* continue to monitor the balance of its teaching activities at all levels to ensure that those students not wishing to progress to higher-level study, or indeed, those not intending to complete an Honours degree in the Department, are also amply catered for (1.5)
* take steps to increase the flexibility of course and programme choice available to sports undergraduates (1.11)

**Staffing**

* take further steps to develop a coherent, holistic and realistic staffing strategy consistent with both teaching and research excellence (3.4)
* attempt to enhance the resources available to staff visiting Old Aberdeen, starting with an upgrade of the existing staff room in the William Guild Building laboratories (3.5)

**School Organisation**

* consider enlarging the membership to allow direct representation of (non-Course Co-ordinator) Teaching Fellows, postgraduate demonstrators, teaching technicians and students (4.3)
* introduce a formal intra-Departmental review of potential examination questions (4.4)

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

* undertake to make more use of external reference points and engage more fully with outside bodies to inform design and review of its sports degree programmes (5.4)

**Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

* consider whether it would be appropriate and feasible to streamline some of its teaching to reduce students’ contact hours and workload (6.8)
* address the problems of poorly-preserved cadavers encountered on the Level 2 Anatomy courses (BM2009 and BM2509) *as a matter of urgency* (6.9)
* consider modifications to the Anatomy teaching to address students' concerns about the style and intellectual demands of teaching (6.10)
* give further consideration to the timing and nature of its statistics teaching (6.11)
* review its practices to ensure that feedback on all courses is appropriately prompt and detailed (6.13)
* introduce multiple sets of CAS descriptors that differentiate between different types of assessment (e.g., essay, presentation or research project) and different levels of study (6.14)

**Academic Standards and the Academic Infrastructure**

* set up a working group to consider the extent to which current provision complies with relevant sections of the Quality Assurance Agency's *Code of Practice* (8.5)
* consider the extent to which it may be appropriate to differentiate more finely between the learning outcomes of different programmes (8.8)

**Personal Development and Employability**

* take steps, where feasible, to reduce the patchiness of careers and industrial liaison coverage (9.5)

**Staff Training and Educational Development**

* address the issue of staff's time commitment to the AUPHET programme, and take account of this when calculating staff workloads(11.2)
* take steps to encourage more staff to attend training courses and staff development events (11.3)
* consider moves to introduce a more proactive and overarching support system for teaching fellows and postgraduate demonstrators (11.7)
* ask the Provost to raise the suggestion that the University should do more to provide central career development support specifically for teaching fellows with senior management and Human Resources (11.7)

**Student Involvement in Quality Processes**

* take further measures to promote the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (12.3)
* allow student members to sit on the Teaching Committee and the Industrial Liaison Committee (12.4)

**Student Support, Retention and Progression**

* consider some kind of induction event or orientation programme to help students new to Foresterhill find their way around the campus and its services (14.5)
* provide more information on transfer options and how to go about switching programmes (14.6)
* include in the ITR follow-up report in 2004 an update on steps taken to address concerns about the performance and low progression rates overall of sports students relative to the Department's other students (14.7)

**Recruitment, Access and Widening Participation**

* in conjunction with the Director of Studies (Admissions), consider whether it would be appropriate and possible to raise entry standards for the Sports and Exercise Science programme to levels commensurate with its popularity (15.2)

**Impediments to Quality Enhancement**

* discuss its concerns about staffing and accommodation with the Provost (18.1)