University of Aberdeen, Internal Teaching Review

**Department of History**

*Summary*

This document is extracted from the full report on the Internal Teaching Review of the Department of History conducted in May 2004. It includes the Panel's overall impressions of the provision and a record of the Panel's commendations and recommendations.

Overall Impressions

The Panel was impressed by the consistently high quality of the teaching and learning opportunities provided by the Department of History. Students at all levels whom the Panel met were overwhelmingly positive about their experience, so it was not surprising that the Panel did not identify any major concerns. Reports from the Department's recent external examiners had been complimentary of the academic standards and the quality of provision on offer, and the Panel were happy to support these judgements. It was clear that the Department of History at Aberdeen compares favourably with other departments of history in the UK, and, as the recent Trans-national European Evaluation Project (TEEP) report demonstrated, with others elsewhere in Europe. Nevertheless, the Panel did suggest that the Department consider some minor changes to its curricula, both to enhance the distinctive character of the history degree at the University of Aberdeen, and to bring its provision closer into line with established features of History higher education in continental Europe.

The enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism of the Department's staff lies at the heart of its successful record. Great emphasis is given to close staff-student contact, and the Panel identified provision of detailed feedback on students' work as an exemplary feature. Students were greatly appreciative of the excellent relationships between themselves and the staff, picking out staff approachability as a key attraction of the Department. Students also highlighted the range of choice on offer, the importance attached to traditional writing and research skills and the opportunity to study topics of particular interest in depth at an advanced level as stand-out aspects of the Department's programmes. Recent external examiners had also singled out these features, and the Panel was similarly impressed, in particular being keen to congratulate the Department and DISS on its exemplary collaboration to deliver an integrated and progressive programme of information retrieval skills.

The Panel was concerned that the recent restructuring had disrupted several important aspects of School/Departmental organisations; on the other hand, it was obvious that History was an efficiently and conscientiously organised Department that had the potential to act as a role model for the rest of the School in several areas. In particular, the Panel was impressed by the seriousness with which the Department took students' views, and the novel, comprehensive measures that it took to involve students in quality management and programme review. The Panel did suggest that the Department take steps to strengthen organisation in two areas that had suffered temporarily as a consequence of restructuring, recommending a) the establishment of a steering group for the interdisciplinary Cultural History programme, and, b) revival of the Employer's Liaison Group as an active body. The Panel was pleased to see that the Department had recently completed a formal partnership agreement with the University Careers Service, recognising that this would provide the impetus to boost students' and staff's awareness of employability issues.

The Panel welcomed – and endorsed – the Department's action plan, urging that the individual points be given serious consideration at School and College level. It was noted that several of these action points addressed areas, such as recruitment and staff development, in which there were scope for adjustments to existing practice that would aid the Department's strategy of quality enhancement. The Panel appreciated the aspirations of the Department evident in its submission, and the constructive way in which it had approached the review process, despite having been involved in an unusually high number of similar exercises in recent years. In reaffirming its commendation of the overall quality of the Department's provision, the Panel agreed that it was important for the Department to be given space to develop its 'chalkface' activities, noting that the next full review was not scheduled until academic year 2009/10.

**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:

* the choice of courses offered by the Department (1.8)
* the breadth and innovative character of the Cultural History programme (1.10)
* its well-rounded, comprehensive statement of teaching and learning aims (2.1)
* the committed and professional attitude of the staff at all levels (3.1)
* the role of the support staff in enhancing the Department's activities (3.3)
* its participation in the Trans-national European Evaluation Project (TEEP), and the favourable report subsequently made by the TEEP panel (5.2)
* its interest in European developments, including steps taken to strengthen the Department’s presence on CLIOHnet, the European history network (5.2)
* its record of supporting students with disabilities (5.3)
* the important contribution made to an appreciation and understanding of racial, ethnic and cultural differences (5.4)
* the firmly student-centred approach taken by the Department (6.1)
* the ***exemplary***emphasis given to formative feedback, including the use of detailed essay feedback sheets and subsequent one-to-one meetings between staff and students to return material and discuss the student’s performance (6.2)
* for its initiative in instigating the Tutorial Assessment Mark, in particular in the way it had taken considerable care to incorporate student views in setting up the new scheme (6.3)
* its comprehensive and innovative student handbooks (6.4)
* the emphasis on traditional writing skills as part of a rigorous academic training (6.5)
* the *exemplary* programme of library and research skills education provided in conjunction with Gilian Dawson of DISS (6.7)
* the range of theoretical and methodological issues that students were exposed to (6.8)
* the Department’s willingness to take measures additional to those required by the University gather the views of students (7.1)
* efforts made by the Department to build progression in terms of knowledge content and intellectual skills acquisition into its curricula (8.3)
* the active and enthusiastic approach taken by the Department to training of research students, including its willingness to experiment in order to find which methods worked best (9.1)
* efforts made to provide networking opportunities for postgraduate students (9.3)
* new work on employability issues in conjunction with the University Careers Service (10.1)
* attempts to conduct long-term surveys of graduates’ career development, and the opportunity to undertake a work placement as part of the fourth-year core programme (10.3)
* the intention to make greater use of the LTSN subject centre (11.1)
* its various links with outside institutions and interest groups (11.2)
* the existing peer observation arrangements for new and temporary staff, and plans to introduce a formal scheme of peer observation for all staff members (12.2)
* its thorough and far-reaching system of student representation (13.1)
* use of student referenda to investigate major issues (13.3)
* the visits made to classes by the Convener of the Teaching Committee and the Deputy Head of School at the start of the year specifically to explain to students what changes had been made in response to previous feedback (13.4)
* its success in raising the Level 2/Level 3 retention rate (15.2)
* efforts made to publicise Honours courses at an early stage (15.3)
* the *Information for Prospective Students* document (16.3)
* production of the action plan (22.1)

**Recommendations**

*The Panel invites the Department to consider the following recommendations, and asks that the Head of School and the Head of College, consulting with the Deputy Head of School and the College Director of Teaching and Learning as appropriate, provide an agreed response to each.*

The Panel recommended that the Department:

**Range of Provision**

* consider adjusting its programme prescriptions to ensure that Singles Honours students gain at least some experience of medieval, early modern and modern history (1.8)
* consider reform of the Level 1 curriculum to restrict choice, enforce exposure to all major historical periods, and focus teaching resources (1.9)

**Aims of Provision**

* take a more explicit stance in promoting transferable skills/employability as key learning outcomes of a degree in History (2.1)
* consider giving greater priority to foreign language training within its programmes (2.2)
* consider measures to impart a distinct Aberdeen 'flavour' to its teaching (2.3)

**Staffing**

* raise the need to take greater account of teaching needs when recruiting new staff with School and College management (3.2)

**School Organisation**

* *with the School and College* take steps to improve communications and promote inclusive governance, whilst ensuring that the new arrangements do not unduly erode disciplinary identity and influence (4.1)
* *with the School and College* take steps to ensure effective and transparent upwards representation of the views of all categories of staff (4.2)
* invite the College to establish a Cultural History Steering group (4.3)

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

* take steps to strengthen its European links further (5.2)

**Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

* report more fully on the success of the Tutorial Assessment Mark scheme in its one-year follow-up report to the review (6.3)
* consider making greater use of oral presentations as part of its portfolio of assessments (6.5)
* proceed with an application for permission to cap its Honours courses, given the support for this measure from its students (6.10)
* take steps to enhance its published mark schemes, in particular by stating clearly the different expectations made of students at different levels of study (6.11)

**Academic Standards and the Academic Infrastructure**

* consider whether it was necessary to introduce stricter pre-requisites to lower levels of the History degree programmes (8.3)

**Training and Supervision of Research Students**

* raise the prospect of reviving the old Faculty studentships with the School and College (9.1)
* press the School and College for additional space to house its postgraduate students in the future (9.4)

**Personal Development and Employability**

* include an update on progress made with the Partnership Agreement in its one-year follow-up report (10.1)
* take steps to re-form the Employer Liaison Group as soon as possible (10.4)

**Professional Units/Bodies**

* provide an update and an evaluation of its contacts with the LTSN as part of its one-year follow-up report (11.1)

**Staff Training and Educational Development**

* include in its one-year follow-up report an evaluation of progress made in the area of staff development from the date of the review (12.1)
* take up the issue of staff development at a School and College level (12.1)
* report on progress in the area of peer observation in its one-year follow-up report (12.2)
* *with the School and College* formalise support for non-permanent staff who teach (12.3)

**Student Involvement in Quality Processes**

* consider means of clarifying the process of student representation (13.5)

**Student Support, Retention and Progression**

* continue to monitor student retention rates, acting as necessary to maintain the appeal of its courses relative to those offered by other disciplines (15.2)
* *with the School and College* investigate, and if necessary, address problems of 'homelessness' experienced by students following inter-disciplinary degree programmes (15.6)
* *with the School and College* address the absence of dedicated space for taught and first-year research History postgraduates (15.7)

**SHEFC Quality Enhancement Engagements**

* *with the School and College* take steps to raise the profile of quality enhancement (17.1)

**Other Issues**

* take forward its action plan, noting the Panel's firm support for the actions listed (22.1)

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

**COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**MEMORANDUM**

To: Dr Nick Spedding, Registry Officer

From: Professor Trevor Salmon, Director of Teaching and Learning

## Date: 14 September 2004

Subject: **HISTORY ITR**

Further to your memorandum dated 17th August 2004, regarding the Internal Teaching Review Report: History, please find below the College response to the points raised:

1. CASS is very pleased that the ITR panel did not identify any major concerns. The History discipline is to be congratulated.

1. CASS wishes to congratulate History on the “Commendable Features”, and other comments which relate to the enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism of the staff. There are many examples of best practice.
2. CASS notes the ITR panel’s reservations about the consequence of restructuring. The College recognises that there was a hiatus as it moved to the new School structure. However, during this period a model of School governance was established almost immediately, with such model being that which was eventually decided upon by the College’s Governance Working Party.
3. More specifically CASS would like to comment on “4. School and Departmental Organisation (pp5-6). The College acknowledges that there has been no permanent Head of School since September 2003. However, an acting Head of School has been in place since this time with no management distinction made between the role of acting and permanent Head of School or to the decision-making process current in other Schools. During this period, strenuous efforts have been made to recruit a new Head of School, who will be in office, by the end of September 2004.

The College has moved away from having distinct departments as administrative structures, nonetheless, within the School the area had both a research discipline leader and a programme discipline leader, thus discipline identity has been preserved in both areas. This School will be further emphasising discipline identity by encouraging frequent meetings over the next academic year.

With respect to ‘inclusion’, within the new structure the School has more fora than the previous departmental structure. In the current structure there are School Teaching & Learning and Research Committees, which have representation from all levels within the School. In addition, there is a School Executive, which comprises the Head of School, two deputy Heads of School, the conveners of the Teaching and Learning and Research Committees and the School Administrative Officer. In addition, there is a School forum with elected representation, which allows individuals from all disciplines to participate in the decision-making process. Finally, School meetings are held regularly to give all members of staff the opportunity to discuss issues of importance.

Also highlighted is the area of Cultural History. From the College’s perspective, Cultural History is part of the broader discipline of History with some additions from Anthropology. The School has recognised that there are certain issues with this degree and has already decided to set up a working party to formalise the relationship between History and Cultural History and resolve the issues that have arisen in relation to Anthropology. CASS will examine the recommendation to establish a “Cultural History Steering Group” with the new Head of School.

5. CASS accepts the recommendations under ‘Teaching, Learning and Assessment’ but recommends that UCTL examines the role of External Examiners in assessing “oral presentations”.

1. CASS accepts that throughout the University, Schools and Colleges need to improve communication, particularly for “effective and transparent” upwards and downwards communication.
2. The College accepts the need for promoting transferable skills/employability and the notion of a distinct ‘Aberdeen’ flavour to the degree.
3. Foreign language training raises a number of important issues for the discipline and for CASS, not least of which are, a) fte’s, b) who would impart language skills?