UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN, INTERNAL TEACHING REVIEW

# SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

*Summary*

This document is extracted from the full report on the Internal Teaching Review of the School of Psychology conducted in March 2005. It includes the Panel's overall impressions of the provision and a record of the Panel's commendations and recommendations.

## Overall Impressions

The Panel ***commended*** the School’s engagement with and positive attitude towards the review process. This was indicative of a well organised and integrated School, with an effective and supportive learning environment, keen to benefit from the Internal Teaching Review process. This positive attitude and engagement was evident in the outstanding quality of the documentation submitted, and the School’s co-operation with the Clerk throughout the process. The Panel was very impressed by the strong leadership style and commitment of the Head of School, Dr Peter McGeorge, and acknowledged the hard work of the staff directly involved in producing the ITR documentation.

The Panel agreed that the School should be ***commended*** for the care and attention given to the provision and assessment of teaching and learning. The School’s success at providing an undergraduate programme that is consistent with the criteria set by the British Psychological Society is ***exemplary***. The Panel also ***commended*** the School on the delivery and content of the MRes programme and was impressed that in recognition of its high standards of postgraduate training, the course was awarded formal recognition by the ESRC in 2003.

The Panel was impressed by the School’s friendly atmosphere, which all students and staff that they spoke with appreciated. There was a distinct sense of community amongst level 3 and 4 students and members of staff. That this was less apparent at levels 1 and 2 is understandable, given the number of students at these levels. The Panel was impressed by the high motivation, commitment and positive attitude of the staff from all levels in the School whom it met, and ***commended*** the School accordingly.

The School makes extensive use of teaching fellows, teaching assistants and post-graduate students to deliver teaching to levels 1 and 2. The Panel was particularly impressed by their enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism. This was endorsed by positive comments from the students interviewed and the Panel therefore wished to single out this group for a ***special*** ***commendation***.

The Panel ***commended*** the School for the organisational structures it has in place. The School Teaching Committee has a clear and wide-ranging remit and is kept informed by a well designed network of committees with clearly defined roles.

The School’s policy on admission to honours at the end of Level 2 is restricted to students who have attained an acceptable level of performance in their level 2 courses (normally an CAS of 14). The Panel felt the School was disadvantaging many students who did not meet the progression criteria and did not have a second honours option in place. The Panel had ***serious concerns*** with this policy.

The Panel noted that the School expressed concern about the poor attendance, performance and lack of motivation of Designated Degree students and was pleased that a subgroup of the School Teaching Committee was currently looking into methods of changing the delivery of the tutorial system that might enhance attendance and ensure the submission of course essays. The Panel ***strongly recommended*** that the School should do more to address their concerns about Designated Degree 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:

* development and execution of its ESRC-recognised Masters in Research Methods (MRes) programme (1.4) and (9.1)
* development of a new MSc in Cognitive and Social Neuroscience (1.7)
* the clear progression in core subjects as the curriculum develops from levels 1 to 4 (2.1)
* the emphasis on developing students’ numerical, computing, experimental and analytical skills, which provides particularly distinctive learning outcomes for students registered for the MA degrees (2.2)
* the motivation, commitment and positive attitude of all levels of staff (3.1)
* the contribution made to teaching by, and the excellent attitude of, teaching fellows, teaching assistants and postgraduate student demonstrators (**special commendation**) (3.3)
* the Schools' organisational structures (4.1), including its Horizontal Year Committees (4.2) and Vertical Review Committees (4.3)
* the School’s success in providing an undergraduate programme consistent with the criteria set by the British Psychological Society – rated as an ***exemplary*** feature (5.1), (8.2) and (11.1)
* the standards, high quality and wide range of teaching, learning and assessment methods used (6.1).
* the package of distinctive innovations including:
* Level 1 Research Participation Practicals and oral presentations
* Peer-tutoring scheme
* Level 4 mock conference
* Level 4 Critical Review course.
* the programme of careers talks
* development of SuperLab Tutorials (6.2)
* the use of learning technologies, including WebCT and SuperLab (6.3)
* training workshops for second and third year research students (9.3)
* the School’s emphasis on discipline-specific and transferable skills (10.2)
* production of a Partnership Agreement with the Careers and Appointments Service (10.3)
* the programme of careers talks from practising psychologists (10.4)
* the wide range of outside contacts cultivated by the School's staff (11.2)
* inclusion of student representatives on the External Liaison Group
* the contribution made to student support by the teaching fellows, teaching assistants and postgraduate student demonstrators (15.2)
* the content of the School's action plan (21.1) [SEE APPENDIX]

**Recommendations**

*The Panel invites the School to consider the following recommendations, and asks that the Head of School and the Head of College, consulting with other staff as appropriate, provide an agreed response to each.*  [Recommendations enclosed in square brackets are directed elsewhere, although the School and College are invited to comment on these issues should they wish to do so.]

The Panel recommended that School:

**Staffing**

* ensure that the College is fully aware of the imperative to keep staff-student ratios within the limits necessary for BPS accreditation (**strong recommendation)** (3.2)
* introduce a formal mechanism for support of teaching fellows and teaching assistants (3.3)
* with the College, undertake regular reviews to ensure that technician support remains at effective levels (3.4)

**School organisation**

* rename the School Teaching Committee the *School Teaching and Learning Committee* (4.1)
* consider having at least one meeting per semester of student representatives from all four years, so that issues discussed at the meetings of the Year Committees can be explained to the student representatives of other years (4.2)
* involve outside members of the External Liaison Committee in the work of the School Teaching Committee (4.4)

**Course and programme design, accessibility and approval**

* address the Panel's **serious concerns** with the School's Honours entry policy (5.1)

**Teaching, learning and assessment**

* take steps to improve the interaction between students from different levels of study (6.6).
* consider providing more detailed feedback on assignments (6.7)

**Academic standards and the academic infrastructure**

* consider introduction of a formal mechanism to share the experience obtained by staff acting as external examiners elsewhere (8.4)

**Personal development and employability**

* strengthen careers guidance for those students not necessarily intending to work as professional psychologists, (10.4)
* provide targeted careers support for Designated Degree students (10.5)

**Staff training and educational development**

* introduce a formal staff development policy (12.1)
* use the one-year follow-up report to discuss the impact of the reinstated mentoring scheme for non-probationary staff (12.3)

**Student involvement in the quality processes**

* include student representation on the School’s Teaching Committee

**Student support, retention and progression**

* investigate the intentions and motivations of Designated Degree students, with a view to promoting better engagement with their studies and so improving their learning experience (15.3); the School is asked to report back on this is one year's time
* [the University Committee on Teaching and learning should be invited to consider the School's suggestions that the opportunity to gain a Designated Degree award with *Merit* or *Distinction* would act as an incentive, and add value to the educational experience of students following Designated Degree programmes (15.3)]
* invite Estates to give the corridors in William Guild Building a facelift (15.6)

**Recruitment, access and widening participation**

* develop improved links with the Centre for Lifelong Learning (16.1)

*School Response*

The School welcomes the extremely positive views of the panel on the current provision of Psychology teaching in Aberdeen and is grateful for the significant number of commendations contained in the ITR report. We would like to thank the panel members for their views on how the current provision might be enhanced and have considered their recommendations in great detail.

The main concern expressed in the ITR report is over the School’s policy on Honours selection and the related issue of high student numbers relative to staffing. The panel expressed concern over staffing levels within the School (section 3.2). In the last session the School had 513 student ftes. Ftes in the coming session (2005–2006) are expected to rise due to 1) an increase in the Honours class size, 2) further increases in the number of students being admitted to the University with Psychology (single and joint honours) as a degree intention, and 3) the inclusion at level 1 of students from the School of Education, for whom the level 1 Psychology course will now be mandatory. In addition to a projected increase in student ftes, two academic members of staff have recently taken up posts elsewhere. Therefore, based on the current staff totals, the staff:student ratio (SSR) is expected to exceed 1:20 for the 2005-2006 session. Following the appointment of replacement staff and assuming no further dramatic increase in student ftes, the SSR is then expected to fall back to just below 1:20 for the 2006 – 2007 session.

An SSR of better than 1:20 is critical as this is the maximum SSR acceptable to the British Psychological Society. Courses in which the SSR does not meet the BPS requirements will not be accredited. Loss of accreditation would have a catastrophic effect on student recruitment as the course would no longer provide a basis for pursuing a career in Psychology. In addition to BPS considerations, the current and anticipated SSR is higher than comparable research-led institutions. These factors militate against further increases in student numbers, beyond those already planned, in the absence of significant increases in resource. The College of Life Sciences and Medicine is monitoring the SSR and will make provision to ensure that the School is able to maintain a reasonable SSR both in terms of the supervision of Honours projects (see below) and the requirements of BPS accreditation.

The issue of the SSR cannot be separated from the panel’s concern (section 5.2) over the School’s policy of only admitting to Honours students who had attained an acceptable level of performance in their Level 2 Psychology exams. The panel appears to have three principle concerns with the School’s selection policy. Firstly, that the selection process was not equitable across years, in that a student obtaining a mark lower than the published criteria would be accepted to Honours in a year when the School still had available resources after admitting applicants reaching the published criteria but not in a year when there were no remaining resources (5.2a). Secondly, that not all advisors were aware of the selection criteria (5.2b). Thirdly, that the policy disadvantaged students who did not achieve the required criteria but who had no other honours progression pathway (5.2c).

The School’s policy on selecting for Honours needs to be set in context. While students can, depending on the course taken alongside Psychology in the pre-honours years, take either a Master of Arts or Bachelor of Science honours degree, Psychology is a science. As a science, a significant component of the course involves practical and laboratory work and this places significant resource demands on the School. The greatest resource demands arise in relation to project work (group and individual), a required component of a BPS accredited Psychology degree. In particular, the supervision of final year projects and the availability of suitable laboratory space (see comment in section 15.6) results in significant resource demands. In order to provide the form of high quality learning environment which has attracted such positive comment from external examiners (past and present), the size of the Honours class must be matched to the available resources. In addition it should be noted that the School’s policy of selecting for Honours is in line with comparable Scottish Universities.

In operating its Honours admission policy the School has always strived to maximize the use of its resources and to give every student an equal opportunity of gaining admission to the Honours programme. In terms of the panel’s perception that there is a lack of consistency (5.2a) in the application of the Honours entry criterion, the School has considered applying the entry requirements rigorously and independently of whether there was in fact the capacity to take extra honours students in that session. However, while this would ensure consistency across cohorts it could also disadvantage students within cohorts.

The panel were also concerned that some advisors may be unaware of the entry criteria (5.2b). This issue will be addressed by asking that advisors be issued with the information in their pre-session briefing documents. However, it should also be noted that even if an individual advisor is not aware of the entrance requirements, the information is very clearly available to students. The information on the entry requirements is clearly stated in both the Level 1 and Level 2 handbooks (given to students at the start of each session), it is included as part of the information sent to students joining the University, and is clearly stated during the registration meeting for Level 2 students.

The panel were concerned that given the entry criteria (currently a combined CAS of 28 across the two level 2 exams, mean of 14), the School is pre-selecting for upper second class honours. Since the School current criterion is 14 (lower second) and the School accepts (subject to resources) students who do not meet this entry criteria it is not clear how this perception arises. The panel also expressed concern about those students not admitted to honours who have no alternative honours progression pathway. It is hard to see how the school can address this issue in a way that is fair to all students, beyond asking that all advisors be reminded both of the selection criterion and the need to ensure students have an alternate progression pathway. To accept students into honours who had failed to meet the criteria just because they had no alternative pathway would appear unfair on those students who are not accepted. It would also provide students with a reason to set up a non-progression pathway. The School will seek to have advisors reminded of the importance of alternative progression pathways.

In response to the comments made by the ITR panel the School will undertake, for an initial trial period of one year, to set an Honours entry requirement more closely aligned to the criteria set in other Schools with Honours selection (a combined CAS of 24, mean = 12). This level of entrance requirement is in line with BPS guidelines that indicate that in future in order to have the graduate basis for registration, a necessary pre-requisite of professional psychology careers, students must obtain a second class honours degree. In order to establish the consistency across cohorts that concerned the panel, this criterion will be applied rigorously. However, should student numbers indicate that these changes will have a detrimental impact on the quality of the undergraduate programme, particularly in respect of the methodology component, the School will need to reconsider whether this new criterion is sustainable.

In addition to changes to the Honours entry criteria, the School will also conduct a survey of both Level 2 and Level 3 students (Honours and Designated) to ascertain career aspirations amongst students taking psychology, original and current degree intention, knowledge of the entry criteria for Honours. The information from this survey will be used to facilitate the careers service in the provision of career information for Psychology students (section 10.4, 10.5, 15.3). Moreover, we hope that the overall motivation and morale of these students will benefit from the new Level 3 Tutorial system introduced this year.

The panel made a number of additional comments in their report. In section 3, the panel commented on changes in the level of technical support within the School (3.4). Previously technicians carried out duties that were more properly the responsibility of teaching and administrative staff. The proper allocation of these duties may have created the erroneous perception that *technical* support has been decreased. The School will ensure that staff are fully briefed on the technical support available within the School and the College.

In section 4 the panel commented on aspects of the School organisation. In response to these comments, the School Teaching Committee has been renamed the School Teaching & Learning Committee (4.1). In order to ensure that students participate more actively in internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures, student representatives from every year will attend at least one meeting of the STLC (13.2). Students’ attendance at this committee will also ensure the interaction of students at all levels (4.2 and 6.6). Members of the External Liaison Committee will also be invited to the STLC (4.4).

In response to comments made in section 6.7, the School will introduce a feedback cover-sheet that can then be used to monitor the nature of the feedback and can also be shown to the externals. To ensure a more structured mechanism for feeding back information from staff that act as externals at other institutions (8.4), feedback will be included as an item at the internal examiners meeting. The introduction of a staff appraisal scheme in the spring of 2006 will provide a more formal mechanism to identify and monitor staff development (12.1 & 12.3).

Finally, in the medium term and to address issues of wider access, the School is considering the introduction of a distance-learning course at level 1 and increasing the number of visits to Schools traditionally having a low level of involvement with the University (16.1). A member of staff from the School also attends meetings of the Joint Widening Access Sub-Committee, recently convened by the College of Life Sciences & Medicine, and College of Physical Sciences.

*Appendix: School of Psychology Action Plan*

## Action Points:

*1. Integrating Programme Review*

The current Internal Review exercise highlighted the need for a more integrated, ‘top-down’ approach to our procedures for course development, approval and review.

The following weaknesses of the current approach were identified (these are covered in greater detail in Sections 7 and 8 of the SED):

(i) A lack of awareness (amongst staff and students) of the overall programme aims and objectives set out in the Programme Specifications and Curriculum Map for the Undergraduate Taught Programmes

(ii) Weaknesses in the reporting procedures of the different committees associated with teaching and learning

In order to improve upon our current procedures, the following ***Actions*** will be undertaken:

(i) An extra-ordinary meeting of the School Teaching Committee (STC) scheduled for the end of each academic session will take place with the specific remit of (a) reviewing the Programme Specifications and Curriculum Map for the Undergraduate Programmes (b) ensuring that the Undergraduate Programmes continue to meet the requirements for BPS accreditation. The Programme Specifications and Curriculum Map will be published on the School’s website so that staff and students are aware of the aims and structure of our Degree Programmes. Changes in the reporting procedures (see point below) will also ensure greater staff involvement in the development and review of the programmes.

(ii) The chairs of the External Liaison Group, and the newly restructured Vertical Review Committees (see Action Point 2) will now report directly to the end of session meeting of the STC (in addition to the usual representation from the Year Convenors).

*2. Restructuring the Vertical Review Committees*

As a result of recent recommendations by the BPS, we intend to modify existing structure of the Vertical Review Committees (VRCs) in order to ensure that we continue to review our teaching of the core areas of the Psychology Curriculum required for BPS accreditation.

In particular, the following ***Action*** will be undertaken:

(i) The existing structure of the VRCs require to be changed in line with recent BPS recommendations. In particular, the teaching of ‘Historical Issues’ in the curriculum will be considered explicitly by each of the VRCs in their review. The Methodology Vertical Review Committee will review the coverage of ‘Conceptual Issues’ in the curriculum.

*3. The Level 3 Tutorial System*

Despite changes in the delivery of the Level 3 Tutorial System in recent years, this scheme is still considered problematic by many members of staff. In particular, the continued growth in numbers of students taking the Designated Degree Programme has resulted in group sizes of 12 to 16 students which has led to organisational difficulties particularly in relation to student oral presentations. Oral presentations have been an integral part of the Level 3 Tutorial System for a number of years and encourage the development of both analytic and communication skills. This emphasis upon transferable skills is especially important for Designated Degree Students who graduate at the end of Level 3.

A subgroup of the STC has already been asked to provide proposals for an alternative method of delivering tutorials while maintaining their value to Designated Degree students. The following ***Action*** is recommended:

(i) Concrete proposals for a modified Level 3 Tutorial System are prepared in time for presentation at the end of session meeting of the STC. Depending upon the nature of these proposals, the School will try to negotiate further access to rooms in the newly refurbished MacRobert Building, that are suitable for small group teaching.

*4.* *Evaluating the components of the MRes Degree Programme*

In addition to student-led research activities and expert-led seminars, the MRes Degree Programme comprises three components, the Research Project (PS5001), Professional Research Skills (PS5002), and Advanced Research Methods (PS5501). Currently the School uses its own course evaluation forms in order to obtain student feedback. However, we recognise that in compliance with University procedures, individual SCEF forms are required for each of the different components of the taught programme.

The following ***Action*** will be undertaken:

(i) A separate SCEF form for each of the three components of the programme (PS5001, PS5002, PS5501), will be developed and delivered.

*5.* *MRes: Recording Minutes*

Currently, the convenors of the MRes course meet frequently throughout the teaching session with students’ supervisors. In order to increase the effectiveness of these meetings so that they might be used more formally as a basis for curriculum review, the following ***Action*** will be undertaken:

(i) Formal Minutes will be taken and made available to staff (as are all Meeting Minutes) on the School’s Administration Drive.

# *6. Peer Review of Teaching*

Currently teaching performance is monitored via the SCEF forms. Prior to processing students’ written feedback on these forms are examined by lecturers, course co-ordinators and year convenors, ensuring that these comments, as well as the data from the statistical returns, are made available to the teaching staff. When writing new lectures, staff also seek the opinions of their colleagues. Nevertheless, in recognition of the increasing emphasis placed upon peer review of teaching, the School is actively considering a more formal system of peer review.

The following ***Action*** will be undertaken:

(i) A proposed system for peer review is presented to the STC for consideration.

# *7. Staff Development & Training: tracking attendance and measuring effectiveness*

Despite the relatively high attendance of many staff at different university training courses (and external courses), the School does not currently operate a formal system of tracking attendance. As a result of this lack of monitoring, the impact of training upon career development and upon curriculum design are not known. It is therefore proposed that the following ***Action*** is undertaken:

(i) The School develops a formal system of tracking staff attendance at university training courses and that this information is made available to all staff so that knowledge of innovative teaching methods and good practice can be shared.

*8. Graduate Employment Information*

Currently the School receives information about first destination of graduates from the registry and the Careers and Appointments Service. In addition, we also obtain information about career progression beyond the first year of graduation from through our Alumnus Association. Although this information is interesting it is not used to inform curriculum design, or made widely available to undergraduate students. In order to ensure that this information is used more effectively than is currently the case, we propose to undertake the following ***Action:***

(i) To develop a Partnership Agreement with the Careers & Advisory Service, that will comprise a more formal protocol for defining how this information might be disseminated and used more effectively.