Periodic Review of Typography & Graphic Communication

Introduction

1 An internal review of programmes in Typography and Graphic Communication was held on 25 and 26 May 2011. The members of the Panel were:

- Dr. Matthew Almond, Director of Teaching and Learning, School of Chemistry, Food and Pharmacy (*Chair*)
- Simon Bell, Senior Lecturer, Coventry School of Art & Design, Coventry University (*external member, subject specialist*)
- Annie Grove-White, Senior Lecturer, Cardiff School of Art & Design (*external member, subject specialist*)
- Dr. David Carter, School Director of Teaching and Learning, School of Humanities (*internal member*)
- Dr. Paola Nasti, Programme Director, School of Literature and Languages (*internal member*)
- Lucy Evans, Senior Administrative Officer, Faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences (*Secretary*)

2 The Panel met the following:

- Dr. Rob Banham (Admissions Tutor, Part 2 Year Tutor)
- Prof. Jonathan Bignell (Head of School)
- Ruth Blacksell (Lecturer, Programme Director of MA Book Design)
- Susanne Clausen (School Director of Teaching & Learning)
- Dr. Mary Dyson (Director of Postgraduate Studies, Programme Director of MA (Res))
- Eric Kindel (Department Director of Teaching & Learning)
- Gerry Leonidas (Senior Tutor, Programme Director of MA Typeface Design)
- Darren Lewis (Manager, Design & Print Studio)
- Prof. Paul Luna (Head of Department, Programme Director of MA Information Design)
- Charlene McGroarty (Department Officer, Assistant to Head of Department)

3 The Panel met students who represented the following degree programmes:

- BA Graphic Communication / BA Design for Graphic Communication
- MA Book Design
• MA Information Design
• MA Typeface Design
• MA (Res) Typography

The Panel met with graduates who represented the following degree programmes:
• BA Design for Graphic Communication
• MA Information Design
• MA Typeface Design

General observations

4 The Panel met with a range of staff and wished to express its gratitude to those who had participated in the review process. It commended the Department for the provision of the Blackboard Organisation which facilitated members’ access to documentation before the review.

The Panel welcomed the involvement of current and former students who gave a very positive endorsement of the programmes under review and the Panel wished to thank them for their input.

The Panel was particularly impressed by the provision of student pastoral care by all staff. The staff are friendly and supportive and the students clearly recognise and appreciate this. The physical building achieves an enormous sense of community, giving students a strong work ethic and a space for meeting and working, although there was the occasional sense of isolation from the rest of the University. [Good practice a]

Academic standards of the programmes

Educational aims of the provision and the learning outcomes

5 The Panel was provided with evidence in the form of programme specifications, module descriptions, reading lists, student handbooks and external examiners’ reports. These, along with discussions with staff and students, reviewing of students’ work and the Panel’s own deliberations, confirmed that the academic standards of programmes are being met.

Further to its investigations, the Panel was convinced of the breadth of areas covered within the Department’s teaching and the distinctiveness of the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It agreed that the Department is effectively meeting its aims of offering programmes about ‘design for reading’ and of producing graduates who are ‘designers who think’ and ‘literate, critical, reflective practitioners’. Initial concerns raised by the Panel about the links between theory and practice were overturned following discussions with staff and students and the Panel commends the Department’s effective integration of relevant discipline theory into practical based design programmes, and its enhancement of students' employability as a result. The Panel notes the Department’s continued efforts to ensure that the students link theory and practice. [Good practice b]

Curricula and assessment

6 Curricula
The Panel commends the design of the programmes offered, noting the appropriate application of staff research interests and expertise throughout the curriculum. [Good practice c]

Based on feedback from students and graduates, as well the expertise of external panel members, the Panel recommends that the Department consider introducing new material into Part 1 which is specifically related to new media. This could support the Department’s plans to expand the number of Part 1 in-house credits. The Panel noted the Department’s commitment to the theory and practice of ‘design for reading’, and Panel regarded this expansion into new media as locating best practice in emerging media and thus underpinning the ethos and ongoing dynamic of the Department’s research base. Additionally, the Panel’s view was that such developments should bolster the Department’s already commendable employability scope. [Desirable recommendation a]

The Panel recognises the Department’s excellent feedback procedures (returned to in section 9). The Panel suggests that the Department consider reducing the quantity of assessed components within modules to maximise staff efficiency and to encourage students to practice in greater depth. This would also have the effect of speeding up the feedback process even more. The Panel was concerned that the apparent over assessment within some modules may be affecting students’ ability to achieve the high marks they have the potential to obtain if they had the time to produce more enhanced responses to assignments. A reduction in assessments may also reduce the possibility of students being strategic about their submission content, and of questioning the relevance of an assignment if the feedback from the assignment is not directly aligned with the next assignment. [Advisable recommendation a]

Given the comments from students and staff during the review, the Panel understands the rationale for increasing the proportion of discipline-specific credits at Part 1, but recognises that any decision would have to be sanctioned at Faculty level. The Department should, however, consider carefully the potential increase in staff workload and resource demand in order to ensure commensurate student satisfaction. In addition, any reduction of access to extra-disciplinary content should be considered in the light of the attraction for many recruits in the location of the Department and the course within the larger, multi-disciplinary institution of the University. In this context it is noted that many students conceded that they already had fewer links with the rest of the University than they first imagined they might have. [Desirable recommendation b]

The Panel recognised the specialist and unique nature of the postgraduate programmes offered by the Department. Although there are considerable distinctions between the programmes, the Panel recommends that the Department considers cross-programme delivery at appropriate points within the postgraduate programmes in order to encourage creative questioning of direction on the part of the students and to maximise efficiency of delivery. In particular, the Panel sees such possibilities arising within the MA Information Design and MA Book Design, where there are already potentially fecund overlaps. These overlaps are reflected in industry as well, where convenient segregation of activity is less likely to occur, and so there are sound practice-based reasons for this recommendation. [Desirable recommendation c]

Assessment

The Panel considered a small but representative sample of student work, external examiners’ reports, module results and degree results. The impression was of a
surprisingly low number of first-class marks and first and upper-second class degrees awarded, in view of the quality of students admitted and their work ethic in the studio. Discussion with staff suggested that a mark of 85 is seen as the ceiling and that the marking of project work is benchmarked around the mid-50s. Current undergraduates reported that they were told to consider their work as if marked out of 80. The Panel recommends that in consultation with its external examiners, the Department should endeavour to use the whole range of marks in summative assessment. [Advisable recommendation d]

The Panel reviewed module results and degree classification of the last three cohorts of finalist undergraduates. A clear pattern seems to emerge in which rather few students perform better in their Part 3 average than in Part 2, and some do significantly worse. In light of this, the Panel recommends that the Department conducts a thorough annual review of undergraduate module results and feeds any findings into planning through the undergraduate Board of Studies.

The Department is advised to consider ways in which they can add value to students’ performance moving from Part 2 to Part 3. This might be achieved for example by reconfiguring the credit distribution at Part 3 in order to generate the requisite degree of engagement and challenge with the escalation of levels. The Department might also consider analysing an overview of their module descriptors in order to ensure more explicit and productive escalation between levels. The Department might also usefully consider the influence of having two compulsory 40-credit modules at Part 3 on degree classification. [Advisable recommendation c]

Use of student management information

The Panel discussed the increasing importance of student surveys, such as the National Student Survey, and their use in league tables. The Panel recognises the Department’s consistently strong performance in the National Student Survey and commends this. The Panel would welcome the University’s plans to enable Departments to formally review student survey results on an annual basis; to share best practice and to report on how Departments will improve results.

The Panel looked at module conveners’ reports and Board of Studies minutes and found that internal surveys such as student module evaluations are consistently fed into planning. However, a clearer line of accountability is desirable in respect of Student-Staff Committees, which should ideally report directly to the undergraduate and postgraduate Boards of Studies.

The Panel understands that issues raised by students are considered very carefully within the Department but that formal feedback mechanisms from the Staff-Student Committee to the rest of the Department are not clearly demonstrated. The Panel recommends that matters raised at the Student-Staff Committee are formally considered at Board of Studies meetings, with feedback on these issues then given to the students and confirmed at the next Student-Staff Committee. The Panel suggests that the Department considers separating the undergraduate and postgraduate Student-Staff Committee meetings in light of the different and more specialist issues that may arise. [Desirable recommendation d]
Teaching and learning

The Panel echoed comments from students and graduates that they are satisfied and impressed with the teaching and learning of the Department. The skills gained throughout the programmes are valued, most prominently by graduates. The Panel was clear that the Department is providing students with a positive and unique all-round student experience. [Good practice d]

As already noted, this experience and very high student satisfaction, is often attributed to the close-knit nature of the Department and its reflection in teaching. However, the Panel was concerned that at some point this may become difficult to support if student numbers were to increase. The Panel asked the Department to consider how this excellent aspect of the Department could be maintained in an environment where an increase in student numbers may become a University expectation for the Department.

The Panel commends the excellent examples of feedback provided to students by staff, which is comprehensive and thorough. It was clear that that group feedback happens informally within the Department and that this is very useful for the students. The Panel additionally felt that the system by which Part 2 students review the displays of Part 3 students is very good practice. [Good practice e]

However, given the point noted above regarding potential increases in student numbers and existing numbers of students the Panel was concerned about the current and potential impact of the considerable level of feedback, notably oral feedback, which is provided to students. These concerns were duplication of effort, considerable call on staff resources, and varied styles and levels of feedback provided, and potential lack of student independence, this latter point perhaps contributing to the dip in student achievement in Part 3 (noted above, 7 Assessment). The Panel recommends that the Department consider ways in which it could formalise and manage its feedback, especially oral feedback, to students and to effectively communicate this to students in order to manage expectations. For example, staff may wish to consider timetabled feedback sessions, encouraging more formal peer-assessment sessions or mapping explicit feedback approaches at certain places in Part 3. [Advisable recommendation b]

The Panel noted that external examiners had previously raised issues regarding the level of written English of some students. The Panel saw no clear evidence of particularly poor English in any student work that; indeed much was of a very high standard. The Panel can therefore confirm that it regards the Department is managing this issue well.

Student admission and progression

The Panel commends the Department on the high quality of its student intake and its high points score achieved for entry. This is continued throughout the degree programmes with high retention rates of its student cohort. [Good practice f]

As reflected in the Pathfinder competitor analysis and further discussions with students, the undergraduate programme at the University of Leeds is very clearly the Department’s main competitor. This appears to be a result of the programme at Leeds being perhaps the only other comparable programme at a ‘traditional’ university. As a result of feedback from students, the Panel determined that a reason for students choosing Reading instead of Leeds is the small and dedicated nature of the Department of Reading, demonstrated in interviews and at open days.
In light of this, the Panel noted the potential issues connected with any increase in undergraduate student numbers; particularly the impact on one of the Department’s key selling points of small group teaching. However, the Panel recommends that the Department should consider an increased undergraduate admissions target if reasonable efficiencies could be made within the programme e.g. in curricula, assessment and feedback (as recommended above). The Panel encouraged the Department to focus its selling points on its outstanding engagement with employers leading to the recruitment of a significant body of mature students with industrial experience. Integration of new media teaching from Part 1 would contribute to the Department’s tradition of integrating research with emerging industry needs.

[Desirable recommendation e]

The Department’s aims of recruiting students who will progress from undergraduate to postgraduate taught and research are being partially realised, with some students returning to the Department to undertake further study after some time in industry. The majority of the postgraduate community is made up of professionals from the UK and overseas. The Panel supports the Department’s wishes to increase recruitment onto its MA programmes, which are clearly internationally regarded as unique. This uniqueness needs to be marketed to a wider audience, complemented by the high research rating of the Department, in expectation that more students will be encouraged to undertake postgraduate research. Therefore, as well as marketing programmes to current undergraduates, the Panel recommends that the Department extend its marketing in as wide a context as possible, so as to broaden the pool of applicants, particularly to the MA (Res) programme. For example, students studying in a wider range of subject areas may be considered as potential postgraduate applicants.

[Desirable recommendation f]

Learning resources

11 The Panel wished to commend the Department on the excellent use and adaptation of a difficult building to contribute to the positive student learning experience. Students make use of the space effectively to work on projects and share informally. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students primarily work in the Department, and the University Library is primarily used for work on dissertations. [Good practice g]

Although the Panel felt some concern at the separation of students from the hub of the University campus, this concern was not emphatically articulated by staff, students or graduates although they acknowledged the separation. MA (Res) students felt that they would benefit from a dedicated space, similar to or shared with, the PhD students in the Department, due to the nature of their non-studio programme and the Panel recommends that the Department consider this. The Panel asks that the Department follow up on concerns raised by students regarding the lack of printing facilities provided in the Department; issues included numbers of colour printers and printers not working. [Desirable recommendation g]

The in-house Design and Print Studio located in the same building is hugely beneficial, contributing to the employment-focused nature of the programmes. [Good practice h]

The Panel were impressed by the magnificent collections and archives housed in the Department and commended their use in teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is complemented by the reading room which students find a particularly beneficial resource. The Panel understands the enormous difficulties presented in digitising the collection, and thus commends the collection’s accessibility. [Good practice i]
Employer engagement

The Panel considered and appreciated the great focus given to employer engagement and commends the Department’s commitment to students’ career development throughout the undergraduate programme. [Good practice j]

Students clearly demonstrate a remarkable work ethic in their approach to their projects from the early stages of their undergraduate career and spend considerable time working in the Department as excellent preparation for life in industry. [Good practice k]

Despite this, the Panel was surprised to find that the students have trouble recognising the employment opportunities offered through their curriculum. It recommends, therefore, that it would be desirable to manage students’ expectations and perceptions more effectively. The Panel invites the Department to think about ways in which students’ work placements could be formalised in terms of their understanding. The Panel suggests that opportunities to integrate or embed students’ work experiences within the formative or summative assessment of their practice or professional modules could be offered: students could also be alerted to the importance of networking with the practitioners and employers that are involved in the delivery of their programmes. Finally the Department could provide a more structured approach to reinforce links and relationships with the sector (for example, sessions could be organised to clearly outline to students the role of guest lecturers within the industry and to stress the importance of managing their relationship with future/potential employers). [Desirable recommendation h]

Given the varied scope and scale of placement and career pathway opportunities, the Panel suggests that the Department consider a mechanism by which students formalise their emerging identities as designers (via documenting in a variety of media e.g. their own web pages, blogs, paper-based notes, digital portfolios, self-filmed DVDs and apps). The Panel recommends the Department consider placing this in Part 2 so that students generate the necessary productive and critical reflection to help them become autonomous practitioners in Part 3. The Panel notes the intention to embed the five-credit CMS credits at Part 3 however students’ experiences suggest that it could be desirable to spread their career skills training and reflection process across Part 2 and Part 3. [Desirable recommendation i]

The Panel invites the Department to engage with the University-wide debate and training on matters of employability to gauge new opportunities as well as consolidate their existing strengths on this issue.

Enhancement of quality and academic provision

The Panel notes that the Department informally shares experiences of conferences and T&L events but was not convinced that the Department is effectively considering and implementing examples of T&L good practice both from external and internal sources. It is felt that this would be particularly useful at this uncertain time for the sector. The Panel recommends that a member of staff be made responsible for bringing together examples of best practice in T&L; organising visiting speakers internally and externally, liaise with CDOTL and HEA-ADM, Group for Learning in Art and Design (GLAD), and National Teaching Fellows. [Desirable recommendation j]

In connection with this the Panel recommends that a member of staff seek out and establish a lively forum within the Department to formalise discussion of new ideas, innovative practice and sharing of experiences. This would enable the Department to
develop a coherent and responsive overview to meet the evolving demands and expectations faced by both staff and students. The Department may also consider the possibility of running Teaching and Learning seminars for the academic community more generally, inviting graphic design lecturers from other institutions to participate.

[Desirable recommendation k]

Main characteristics of the programmes under review

14 The programmes under review are highly regarded as distinctive in the sector, providing students with a stimulating and unique teaching and learning experience. The programmes provide excellent opportunities for work experience and career learning is embedded into the curriculum. The Department creates a positive community for its staff, current and past students.

Conclusions on innovation and good practice

15 The Panel commends the following as areas where the Department has particular strengths:

(a) The overall family and community feeling of the Department and friendly supportive nature of all the staff;

(b) The effective integration of high level of discipline-specific academic theory into a practical-based design course;

(c) The appropriate application of staff expertise into the taught programmes;

(d) The provision of an overall unique student experience;

(e) The feedback provided to students, its prominence and effectiveness;

(f) The quality of students recruited onto all programmes and student retention;

(g) The provision of excellent learning resources and the admirably effective use of a difficult building;

(h) The Design and Print Studio and the opportunities it provides for students through real jobs;

(i) The Department’s archives and collections, their accessibility and their use in teaching complemented by the Departmental reading room;

(j) The extent to which students are prepared for the workplace throughout their studies;

(k) The work ethic demonstrated by the students.

Conclusions on quality and standards

16 The Panel is assured of the quality and standards of the programmes that have been reviewed, that the intended learning outcomes of the programmes are being achieved by students and that the programmes specifications are appropriate.

Recommendations
The Panel recommends to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities that the following degree programmes be re-approved to run for a further six years (or until their natural end, as noted below):

BA Graphic Communication
BA Graphic Communication and History (withdrawn - students to have completed by June 12)
MA Book Design
MA Information Design
MA Typeface Design
MA (Res) Typography

The Panel does not consider that any recommendations must be addressed as a condition of re-approval.

The Panel makes the following recommendations to the Department:

Advisable

(a) The Department should review the number of projects and repetition of tasks that are assessed in each module on its undergraduate programme and consider reducing the number.

(b) Notwithstanding the best practice in its provision of student feedback, the Department should formalise its process for giving oral feedback to students to reduce concerns related to duplication of effort, inefficient use of staff time, variability, and lack of student independence.

(c) The Department is advised to carry out thorough annual review of module marks post-examination and feed into curriculum planning via its Board of Studies.

(d) The Department is advised to make use of the full range of marks in summative assessments, in consultation with their external examiners.

Desirable

(a) The Department should consider the introduction of new material into its undergraduate programmes, specifically related toward new media design and to provide opportunities for career learning in the use of new media, for example, the production of web sites or blogs where they can formalise and present professional practice.

(b) In recognition of the Department’s desire to increase number of in-house modules at Part 1, to discuss this fully with Faculty Director of Teaching and Learning; considering teaching resource and any potential impact on how its programmes fit with other programmes in Faculty and subsequent academic demands on students in Parts 2 and 3, for example the dissertation.

(c) The Department is recommended to consider ways of sharing teaching on the postgraduate programmes, in particular the Information Design and Book Design MAs.

(d) The Department is encouraged to formalise the routes by which comments received at the Student-Staff Committee are considered at its Board of Studies.
(e) The Panel encourages the Department to consider whether an increased admissions target could be considered if reasonable efficiencies could be made in areas noted above (curricula, assessment and in feedback).

(f) In recognition of its plans to grow its MA provision, the Panel asks that the Department looks at this in a wider context, in particular to try to encourage students onto their PhD programmes, given the high research rating of the Department and to consider ways in which they can broaden the pool of potential applicants to the MA (Res).

(g) The Panel asks the Department to consider investment in enhanced printing facilities and the provision of appropriate office space for MA (Res) students.

(h) The Department needs to make it clearer to the students where they are obtaining work experience and placements through work place visits, visiting speakers, real jobs.

(i) The Panel suggests that the Department re-consider formalising its integration of career management skills provision, as required by the University, into both Parts 2 and 3.

(j) The Department is advised to identify a member of staff to bring together examples of excellent practice in teaching and learning.

(k) The Panel recommends that a forum is established within the Department to formalise discussion of new ideas, innovative practice and sharing experiences in Teaching and Learning.

19 The Panel does not have a recommendation to the Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning as to whether any proposal(s) for new degree programmes should be approved as this is not applicable.