Periodic Review of Fine Art

Introduction

1 An internal review of programmes in Fine Art was held on 6 and 7 March 2012. The members of the Panel were:
   - Professor Adrian Bell, Henley Business School, University of Reading (Chair)
   - Dr David Carter, School of Humanities, University of Reading (Internal member)
   - Dr Rachel Garfield, School of Arts, University of Kent (External member)
   - Dr Rebecca Green, School of Chemistry, Food and Pharmacy, University of Reading (Internal member)
   - Mr David Osbaldeston, School of Arts and Design, Manchester Metropolitan University (External member)
   - Mr Alex Slater, Vice-President (Academic Affairs), RUSU (Student member)
   - Mr Nigel Trethewy, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science, University of Reading (Secretary)
   - Mrs Tasha Easton, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science, University of Reading (Shadow Secretary)

2 The Panel met the following:
   - Professor Jonathan Bignell, Head of the School of Arts and Communication Design
   - Professor Susanne Clausen, Professor of Fine Art, Head of Department
   - Mr Alun Rowlands, Senior Lecturer, School/Department Director of Teaching and Learning
   - Ms Tina O’Connell, Lecturer, UG Admissions Tutor
   - Dr John Russell, Reader, Department Director of Research
   - Dr Kate Allen, Lecturer, Career Learning
   - Mr Tim Renshaw, Lecturer, MFA Convenor
   - Ms Christine Ellison, Lecturer, Learning Technology Co-ordinator
   - Dr Jonathan Dronsfield, Reader, Exams Officer, Library Representative, Department Director of Postgraduate Studies
   - Pil & Galia Kollectiv, Lecturers, Part 1 Convenors
   - Ms Mary Maclean, Lecturer
   - Steve O’Farrell, Studio Technician
   - Gary Harman, Audio Visual Technician

3 The Panel met students who represented the following degree programmes:
   - BA Art
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 was thankful for the fulsome provision of documentation on the Blackboard Organisation, the immediate response to requests for further information and the quality and openness of the discussions throughout the visit.

The Panel met with a large and representative body of students and wished to thank them for their input. These students were a credit to the department, were confident, articulate and fully supportive of the programmes under review. All students reported that the best thing about Fine Art at Reading was the quality of teaching and support for learning, and the intensively developed relationships with the staff.

A number of themes emerged throughout the review and will be dealt with in detail below. In summary: the department needs to ensure that all students are fully aware of the classification rules for the degree programmes; the staff are a strong team and are self-aware of the Department’s position in the UK and they need to develop their own sustainable growth plan to reflect this; the Department is fully engaged with the live issue of technical support, and the Panel supports the on-going review of this provision.

Academic standards of the programmes

Educational aims of the provision and the learning outcomes

5 The Panel noted the Department’s commendable expectation of maturity from its students and engagement with the subject.

The integration of theory and practice is exemplary within the sector and fosters self-directed learning and meaningful investigation within the discipline. It also prepares students for artistic life (employment) beyond the institution. Students are provided with the intellectual and practical skills (despite limited technical and spatial resources and lack of investment) to embark on a future career path as artists or practitioners within the related and broader cultural field.

The progressional nature of the course within the 3 and 4 year programmes runs well and supports students appropriately through their learning process. The Department has recently shifted its teaching from a vertical to horizontal learning programme, so that students are taught with those in the same year as them. This structure supports developmental progression through the programme. This has in turn benefited the students understanding of their accumulated knowledge, confidence to explore and take risks as well as their ability to achieve the learning outcomes.
Curricula and assessment

The research led modules and electives within macro modules expose the students to a broad range of possibilities. They allow students to model a range of art practices within the flexibility of an open module structure. The students’ progressive movement is staff led initially in years one and two with a clear agenda and support towards confident self-directed learning towards the final two years (or one year in the case of the three year programme). There is clear evidence that the students’ work is ambitious within the national benchmarks of the Fine Art sector and that the students are articulate, confident and self-aware: this is a result of the curriculum and good teaching practices within the Department and the use of artists to deliver specialist workshops. The engagement of the staff is manifold and extensive and well-structured while responsive to the student needs and the changes from cohort to cohort.

The Department should build on its existing strengths in internationalisation, not just in terms of study abroad links and attracting overseas students, but also in promoting their international curriculum (Desirable recommendation h).

The Panel found the assessment practice to be robust overall. The marking system is undertaken with two members of staff, and moderated with one blind marker. Written and verbal feedback is given to students on an individual basis. Student self-assessment has recently been implemented: this is to be commended but needs monitoring and consistent application. Assessment of group work is well considered and applied fairly: students are given individual marks according to their individual achievement and continually assessed formatively through a thorough programme of individual and group tutorials, seminars and informal responsive contact; as is the whole programme. It is recommended that assessment guidelines be written to support new and/or temporary members of staff. (Advisable recommendation c)

Use of student management information

Feedback forms are regularly used and performance of individuals and the cohorts are reflected upon in a responsive way. Staff are evidently conscious of the recent NSS results and want to build on that. Their results have improved year on year as a result of these reflections.

Of particular note is the Department’s willingness to respond to student evaluations and to the recommendations of staff-student liaison committees. Recent developments in response to student feedback include: the opening up of studio space; the consideration of blackout curtains in studio space; the change from vertical to horizontal alignment of studio peer groups; and increased use of written feedback. One of the drivers of the current review of technical staff was a petition signed in 2008 by 69 students; as a direct outcome of this petition a digital resources technician has been recruited, although only on a temporary basis.

Quality of learning opportunities offered by the programmes

Teaching and learning

Undergraduate students benefit from a wide variety of formal and informal learning opportunities throughout programmes, including lectures, seminars and practicals. Widespread use is made of group-based teaching and individual tutorials. Central to all
programmes is the amount of time spent in the studio working on large-scale projects. During this time students have extensive access to academic staff and are held to account through regular meetings with their assigned studio tutors. It is also a great benefit to students to be working in open plan studios where they can continuously support and critique each other’s work.

MA students work individually in their own dedicated studio and are full of praise for the quality of teaching.

In studio-based modules, students are encouraged to take risks by experimenting with a broad range of media, working outside their comfort zone. This requires them to pick up new skills, for which there is minimal technical support. It is understood that the department is reviewing this. The Panel advises that such support works best where students learn technical skills for themselves, for example, learning with technical support to make a stretcher rather than having it made for them.

Students are closely involved in their own learning – an example of this is the opportunity to manage their own studio and exhibition space. The Department is beginning to involve students in self-assessment exercises whereby they appraise their own work against departmental marking criteria. This exercise appears to be a recent innovation and it is advisable that it is included as standard in the summative assessment of modules. (Advisable recommendation b)

Student admission and progression

The Department invests a great deal of time in individual interviews of applicants. There is a clear gain here in the number and quality of students admitted, although some students (both undergraduates on four-year programmes and those who had come through foundation courses) confessed that on arrival they found the new ways of working and learning challenging. The Department could consider ways to better integrate students joining the four year programme in year 2.

Student progression is appropriate to the stated aims and outcomes, although students are not always fully aware of the rules for progression, assessment weighting and for the classification of degrees. For example, not all MFA students were aware that the degree is classified on second-year work only (Advisable recommendation d). It is possible that the rules for the classification of undergraduate programmes would become more transparent were they to reflect exactly the credit weighting of modules.

Some first years in the four year programme expressed anxiety regarding their overall learning programme. This was a widespread issue and the Panel felt that the staff would be advised to think about ways to convey to the students the full arc of learning across the programme from the early stages of the course so that the students are fully aware of the overall journey towards final degree. There are clear channels for students to be able access this information from well-arranged noticeboards within the studio to online interfaces. The staff may feel that special information sessions may be appropriate, particularly in years 1 and 2 of the four year programme.

In relation to the MFA programme, a number of students expressed a desire to complete the programme on a part-time basis, over three years instead of two. They believed that the programme had capacity to grow, and that offering this programme on a part-time basis would be attractive to potential applicants. (Desirable}
**recommendation g)**

Study skills are well integrated into modules through opportunities to conceive, pursue and reflect on projects.

**Learning resources**

10 Learning resources within Fine Art provide students with facilities, equipment and expertise to develop their art. The Department makes excellent use of limited and unpromising space to meet the needs of students. However, there is little to no opportunities for developing the space further for growth into new areas or providing space for larger cohorts. Some facilities have been ‘mothballed’ (printing press), and this links to current trends and making best use of space. However, the Panel was mindful that students’ needs change and that these facilities should not be removed. Students’ art interests have led to demand on digital provision and space to show digital based and performance art. This has led to the Department needing to look at changing space and bringing in new space for these needs. There may be opportunity when considering future needs to look at resourcing within the School as a whole when growing these facilities, rather than replicating provision within different departments. However, at the moment there appears to be more demand than digital provision allows for students in all programmes within the larger School and the Panel was supportive of the current initiatives in remodelling a digital media space with appropriate print facilities specifically for students in the Department. *(Desirable recommendation i)*

Technical resource is clearly an important resource for students, and there is a significant shortage in this provision within the Department. The Department is reviewing this issue which is a process that is clearly very important. *(Advisable recommendation e)*

Academic staff provide students with a lot of one-on-one support which is vital in developing students to meet their full potential. This resource (staff: student ratio) should be protected if student numbers increase in future development (see examples of good practice below). Regarding the larger Department (Fine Art and History of Art), Fine Art has highlighted ways to improve collaboration between the sections. One proposal has been to create an academic post that can link the two disciplines. It is desirable to look for other activities that can bring staff from the two sections together, in case co-location of staff members on the campus is infeasible at the present time. *(Desirable recommendation j)*

**Employer engagement**

11 The Department is clearly very outward facing and research-led when it comes to teaching provision. Students have a number of opportunities linked to external collaborations made by the Department. Examples of these are links with museums, other academic institutions, local schools and art centres. Student career choices vary considerably, from education to museum or gallery work. To give students an understanding of the opportunities available to them, the Department asks alumni to come back to support a careers day. Students also gain from post-degree shows, offsite exhibition opportunities and professional practice days. Sessional staff (frequently well-known, practising artists) are used to provide expertise and deliver workshops. Students clearly benefit from this external engagement, and the Department should
aim to highlight these external links and opportunities to its current and prospective students and how these activities link to employability. *(Desirable recommendation f)*

**Enhancement of quality and academic provision**

**12** The Department has coped admirably with the considerable recent turnover of academic staff and has made some excellent replacement appointments. At the same time the Department has pursued a managed increase in undergraduate numbers, which the Panel commended.

Currently high on the Department’s agenda is the management of transitions from school/college to university, and from one part of a degree to the next. The Department has also taken steps so that careers learning pervades the curriculum through Parts 2 and 3. The Department is aware of the requirement to have a student member on their Board of Studies from 2012-13. *(Advisable recommendation a)*

**Main characteristics of the programmes under review**

**13** The programmes in Fine Art present a strong personality, consisting of:

a. an integrated approach to theory and practice based on a rich, research led culture;

b. a supportive framework for students to explore and investigate concerns, moving from initial staff-led projects to self-guided learning;

c. the encouragement to take risks and explore and reflect upon the full spectrum of available media.

**Conclusions on innovation and good practice**

**14** The Department has very high expectations of their students. Students are fully scaffolded within a safe environment to take risks and to follow their own interests in a variety of modes. As a result the students are confident, committed and are able to articulate their context within the wider contemporary environment.

Students have a wide range of study abroad options and are keen to take on this experience and appreciate the opportunity to explore their own development in a new environment. However, issues stemming from miscommunications between the students, the Department and the Study Abroad Office were noted and require resolution. *(Desirable recommendation h)*

The studio space is open plan, available 24 hours (finalists and MFA), encourages peer learning and is managed by the students themselves. The Department makes excellent usage of their limited facilities although it is clear that their current physical resource is not sustainable in the medium term.

The Department is intellectually led and this is demonstrated by their use of research led modules and elective development workshops.

Students comment that the best thing about Fine Art at Reading is their contact and relationship with the committed staff team. Students are supported on an individual basis by staff and this level of support should be protected. In order to maintain this valuable one-to-one contact the Department should develop its own sustainable growth
plan in terms of teaching and technical provision.

Students compete for a variety of outward facing projects, which corresponds with the University employability agenda. These involve residencies, collaborations with other HEIs and local primary schools. Students gain valuable transferable skills that will enhance their prospects with their chosen sector.

The Department provides the students with a commendable balance of both theory and practice. The way this is organised is clearly a unique selling point within higher education in the UK.

Conclusions on quality and standards

15 The Review Panel has concluded that the academic standards of both the Undergraduate and the Taught Postgraduate programmes are appropriate and that the programmes are delivered at the appropriate Level.

Recommendations

16 The Panel recommends to the Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning that, subject to the School addressing the issues listed below, the following degree programmes be re-approved to run for a further six years:

- BA Art
- BA Fine Art
- BA Art and English Literature
- BA Art and Philosophy
- BA Art and Psychology
- BA Art and Film and Theatre
- BA Art and History of Art
- MFA Art

17 Issues to be addressed:

Advisable

a. The Department is aware of the requirement to have student members on their Boards of Studies and we advise that they achieve this for 2012-13.

b. The Department should continue to monitor and consistently apply their innovative use of self-assessment.

c. The Department should produce assessment guidelines to support new and temporary members of staff.

d. The Department needs to ensure that the classification of degrees is clearly articulated and communicated to all students (BA and MFA).

e. The Department is clearly engaging with the issue of technical provision to their students. The Panel fully supports this review process and advises that such technical support is currently at an inadequate level.

Desirable
f. The Department should continue to leverage on their alumni and own professional experience both to promote their programmes and to build into their current CMS provision. In addition, the Department should make current and prospective students more aware of the external engagement that is already taking place.

g. The Department should consider offering the MFA as a part time programme in addition to the full time option. This could be promoted widely in order to provide a larger cohort of Masters students.

h. The Department should build on its existing strengths in internationalisation, in terms of study abroad links and attracting overseas students and promoting their international curriculum. Improved communication with the Study Abroad Office is also desirable.

i. The School should consider the area of resourcing holistically, both in terms of technical staffing and access to learning resources.

j. The Department should look for activities that can bring Fine art and History of Art together, even if co-location is not viable at present.

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.