1. An internal review of undergraduate programmes in the School of Politics and International Relations was held on Tuesday 15 and Wednesday 16 April 2008.

The members of the panel were:

Professor Rosemary Auchmuty, School of Law
Professor John Baylis, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, University of Swansea
Professor Ginny Gibson, Director of Teaching and Learning, Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences (Chair)
Professor David Keen, Professor of Complex Emergencies, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science
Dr Peter Miskell, Director of Teaching and Learning, School of Business
Ms Rhoda Phillips, Senior Administrative Officer, Faculty of Arts and Humanities and Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences
Dr David Ashton, Sub-Dean, Faculty of Arts and Humanities and Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences (Secretary)

2. The Panel met with the following staff from the School of Politics and International Relations:

Dr Alan Cromartie
Dr Phillip Giddings (Head of School)
Dr Jonathan Golub
Professor Beatrice Heuser
Mrs Patricia Hicks
Dr Jeremy Lester (School Director of Teaching and Learning)
Dr Geoff Sloan
Dr Oisin Tansey
Dr Dale Walton
Professor Peter Woodward
Dr Dominik Zaum

and with

Mr Ian Sainsbury from Library Services.

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

BA in History and Politics
BA in International Relations and Economics
BA in Politics and Economics
BA in Politics and International Relations

and with recent graduates who had completed the following degree programmes:

BA in History and International Relations (2005)
BA in History and Politics (2006)
BA in Politics and International Relations (graduating years 2003 and 2007)
4. General Observations

The Panel:

(i) was pleased to meet with staff from the School in what was a very friendly and co-operative manner. Such an atmosphere greatly helped the Panel in its work.

(ii) welcomed the involvement of current and former students. Students gave a very positive endorsement of the programmes under review. The panel was particularly impressed by the feeling the students conveyed of having been cared for and valued whilst at Reading. The panel would like to thank both current and former students for their valuable contribution.

(iii) received a comprehensive Self Evaluation Document prepared by the School and would wish to commend the School on its submission.

5. Academic standards

Aims and learning outcomes

The Panel is assured the aims and learning outcomes of the programmes that have been reviewed are appropriately informed by Subject Benchmarking statements and by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework; and that the aims and learning outcomes of these programmes are appropriately pitched.

Curricula

The Panel:

(i) is assured the content and design of curricula are informed by recent developments in teaching and learning and that students are directed towards up-to-date scholarship.

(ii) commends the way the curriculum demonstrates progression in developing subject knowledge and academic skills and helps students to become independent learners.

(iii) is not persuaded the BA in Politics and International Relations and the BA in War, Peace and International Relations are sufficiently distinct. The Panel would encourage the School to reflect upon ways in which the BA in War Peace and International Relations might be made more distinct and to consider how this can be communicated effectively to potential applicants including re-branding in order to improve student recruitment. (recommendation 1)

(iv) recognises the School is moving forward in developing diversity in the curriculum however would encourage the use of an even greater diversity of voices and perspectives across the curriculum. (recommendation 2)

(v) suggests, in regard to the joint degrees ‘BA in International Relations and Economics’ and ‘BA in Politics and Economics’, the School considers a greater emphasis in the curriculum on political economy. The political economy of war could also be given more emphasis, particularly in the BA War, Peace and International Relations. (recommendation 3)

(vi) is not convinced of the value to students of the Study of Politics module. The Panel’s primary concern is the skills embedded in this module should be delivered at a much earlier stage in a student’s career, notwithstanding the reality that final registrations for degree programmes are not complete until the start of the second year.
The Panel therefore recommends that the School seek to review how these initial academic skills can be developed at Part 1. It supports the extension of the Part 1 curriculum by the introduction (or re-introduction) of a third Part 1 Politics module and considers this a positive step. The Panel is not advocating a stand alone skills-learning module but rather it would suggest the School seeks to deliver these skills at Part 1 on a pervasive basis as part of one or more of the Part 1 modules. (recommendation 4)

Any relocation of core learning skills from Part 2 to Part 1 raises a question of how best to use the vacated space in the Part 2 curriculum. The Panel believes there remains a strong case for a stand alone additional skills development module at Part 2, but not one that addresses much of the current content of the Study of Politics module. Instead, it sees this as an opportunity for the School to address the skills required by students in politics and international relations working towards their final year dissertation. The Panel would recommend the School re-positions the Study of Politics module to deal with undergraduate-level research skills training. (recommendation 5)

Assessment

The Panel:

(i) is assured the programme handbooks and other literature for the programmes reviewed communicate assessment criteria to students both clearly and fully and commends the School for development of a standard essay feedback form which has full and understandable assessment criteria.

(ii) welcomes the School’s recent decision to increase the percentage weighting given to coursework in overall module marks and was encouraged by the way in which the School had engaged with the students via the Student Staff Committee in making this adjustment.

(iii) would question whether the School might be more inventive with its portfolio of summative coursework assessments. The Panel recognises that across the politics and international relations discipline the essay predominates as a mode of assessment, and as such it has no desire to play down its importance in the assessment portfolio used by the School. Nevertheless the Panel considers the School should do more to be innovative in developing other modes of summative coursework to sit alongside the essay in order to assess a wider range of transferable skills such as oral presentations, group projects and simulations. (recommendation 6)

The School has suggested the University’s new regulations for re-assessment make innovation in assessment difficult. The Panel disagrees with this view. The Panel considers these regulations simply require the School to develop an adaptive approach to the ways in which work could be assessed on a second occasion.

(iv) noted the School’s commitment to maintaining exacting standards via its longstanding practice of blind double marking examinations at Part 3. However, the panel is concerned that the amount of resource the School commits to blind double marking might be better channelled towards enhancing the student experience in other ways. The Panel recommends the School reviews its policy, and considers adopting the University approach of moderation, and uses the resource savings achieved to help address some of the other recommendations of this report. (recommendation 7)
(v) **commends** the School for the manner in which its assessment regimes allow students to develop and demonstrate their *academic* skills. The Panel has no doubts about the School’s strength in this regard and recognises that these skills can be used in a wide range of professions. By contrast, the Panel questions whether *transferable skills* are sufficiently embedded in the curriculum and mapped onto assessment regimes to allow student to demonstrate an equivalent standard of transferable skills learning outcomes.

The Panel recommends the School undertakes a formal mapping exercise to improve the articulation between learning outcomes at module and at programmes levels. This mapping should include developing an understanding of how the assessment regimes across the programme enable students to demonstrate the breadth of learning outcomes. (**recommendation 8**)

(vi) **commends** the School for the quality of feedback given on student essays. The evidence of this review is that the School’s practice is exemplary and *good practice* for other Schools and Departments to follow.

(vii) would question the appropriateness of the School’s in-house procedure for hearing student appeals against essay marks and would advise the School to further reflect on this practice, in the light of the increased importance of coursework and the process of moderation. The School is encouraged to ensure its procedures align to the University policy in this respect.

6. **Quality of learning opportunities**

**Teaching and learning**

The Panel:

(i) **commends** the School for the manner in which teaching is informed by staff research. This is evident at Part 3, in particular.

(ii) was pleased with the way in which the School had engaged in the Syllabus Review but would argue the range of learning and teaching methods currently employed is limited and would suggest the School might do more to consider where there is scope within the curriculum for innovation. Changes the School might wish to consider introducing include the introduction of simulation exercises, group exercises and the greater use of external guest speakers. (**recommendation 9**)

(iii) notes the personal tutorial system appears to work well. Students reported that staff are available and provide valuable help with both academic and non-academic matters.

(iv) was clear, from discussions with current and former students, and with staff, that the Careers Management Skills module (CMS) was not well embedded in the curriculum nor the field and that it was not providing value to students across the School. The Panel believes the School needs to do much more to embrace this module, by ensuring that it is led by an enthusiastic member of academic staff in the School and to establish a context in which its value and relevance is evident to students. The Panel believes this module might be enhanced by the involvement of alumni in shaping the content of the module and by a contribution to its delivery; and by the School involving employers or other contacts as ‘critical friends’ in assessing how this module might maintain its currency. (**recommendation 10**)
Learning resources

The Panel:

(i) has no major concerns regarding the School’s resourcing of its programmes.

(ii) notes the School has responded to recent comments by External Examiners on use of journal articles and that over the past two years there has been a significant shift towards journal articles on reading lists. It found that not all academic staff were informing the Library of reading lists for modules in good time and encourages the School to work closely with the subject liaison librarian in this regard. The Panel noted that the number of electronic journal providers was limited (e.g. no Swetswise) and suggests the School could look at ways to increase the selection, particularly as the value of journal articles is increasingly being stressed.

(iii) saw a number of course reading packs developed for particular modules which were of high quality and valued by students but was unclear on the School’s procedures for ensuring that these packs are not in breach of copyright law. The Panel would ask the School to assure itself that its procedures are appropriate. (recommendation 11)

(iv) notes the School has done interesting work on Blackboard and commends the School for the development of online submission. The panel also heard that many staff had engaged in the Blackboard training as part of the ‘pathfinder’ process and that there were plans to use the VLE more deeply. Given the current variation across modules in the amount and detail of information available to students on Blackboard, and the potential that this variation may become even greater, the panel would encourage the School to develop a baseline on the minimum content that should be made available on each module on Blackboard to students. (recommendation 12)

(v) is sympathetic to the view articulated by the School in its Self Evaluation Document that it sees its role as developing student skills that will stand students in good stead in employment in the medium term. However, the panel would draw the School to the fact that current performance measures used by the sector usually concern student destination 6 months after graduation and therefore, in the Panel’s view, the School should be giving greater importance to the needs of graduates in securing graduate-level employment in the short term also. The Panel recommends the School reconsiders how it best engages with the types of employers that reflect the variety of career aspirations held by its current and recent graduates such as working with alumni, professional contacts and the careers advisory service. (recommendation 13)

7. Maintenance and enhancement of standards and quality

Admission

The Panel:

(i) has no major concerns regarding admissions policies or practices.

(ii) would, however, suggest that the School might do more to consider how the design of its curricula and the branding of its programmes influence the types of students it tends to attract with a view to questioning whether changes might add further depth to the quality of the applicant pool it typically admits.
Evaluation

The Panel:

Student/Staff Committee

(i) is confident the Student/Staff Committee is an effective forum for evaluation and **commends** the School for its responsiveness to students when issues are raised.

Peer review

(ii) is assured the School’s peer review processes work effectively and consistently.

External Examiners

(iii) **commends** the School for the robust and systematic manner of its responses to external examiners’ reports.

Use of Student management information

(iv) notes that feedback from students through module evaluations, the National Student Survey, and focus groups was considered seriously in the syllabus review. However, the Panel is less clear on how this, or similar, information is used on a regular basis to set future priorities for action. The Panel believes the School might further systemise its procedures for evaluating learning and teaching, and might usefully develop these by evaluating the student experience across Parts of degree programmes as a complement to individual module evaluation.

The Panel believes the School’s processes would be improved by an Annual Quality Review process, which would provide the School with a yearly opportunity to consider both quantitative and qualitative student management information in the round, and to reflect strategically upon the ways in which programmes can be enhanced. (**recommendation 14**)

Enhancement and Quality of Academic Provision

(v) **commends** the School for its engagement with the Pathfinder opportunity. The Panel believes the Action Plan the School has developed coming out of the process is forward looking and highlights various ways of dealing with some of the issues and problems raised during the process. The Panel is also agreed that the process has helped the School in developing a forward looking approach and would **commend** the School for the steps it has already taken on the path towards change.

(vi) also feels, however, that in some regards the Action Plan is timid, and not as strategic and ambitious as it might be. It fails to address some procedural questions the Panel had expected the School to be clear about, such as the timescales the School has set itself to drive change, and an articulation of who from within the staff membership will be responsible for which actions. The Panel believes a ‘road map’ for future development covering, say, the next 5 years would assist the School in creating a short and medium term plan for change and recommends the School takes this idea forward. - (**recommendation 15**)

(vii) further believes that as a mechanism for bringing the Pathfinder process ‘full circle’ the University ought to provide Schools with guidance on building such ‘road maps’ and therefore the Panel will make a formal recommendation to the University that this type of support is given in this and future cases. (**recommendation to the University**)
8. **Main characteristics of the programmes covered by the review**

The Panel found the undergraduate programmes under review to be academically strong, underpinned by the research of members of academic staff and progressively developed student independent learning.

9. **Conclusions on innovation and good practice**

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

1. the way the curriculum demonstrates progression in developing subject knowledge and academic skills and helps students to become independent learners
2. development of a standard essay feedback form which has full and understandable assessment criteria
3. the manner in which its assessment regimes allow students to develop and demonstrate their academic skills
4. the quality of feedback given on student essays
5. the manner in which teaching is informed by staff research
6. the interesting work on Blackboard and the development of online submission
7. the Student/Staff Committee as an effective forum for evaluation and the School’s responsiveness to students when issues are raised
8. the robust and systematic manner of its responses to external examiners’ reports
9. its engagement with the Pathfinder process and for the steps it has already taken to enhance the student experience.

10. **Conclusions on quality and standards**

The Panel is assured of the quality and standards of the programmes that have been reviewed.

11. **Recommendations**

The Panel recommends to the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences that the following degree programmes be **re-approved** to run for a further six years:

BA in Politics and International Relations
BA in War, Peace and International Relations

The Panel also recommends that the following programmes be **re-approved** to run until such time as the next Periodic Review of programmes in the relevant School/Department:

BA in International Relations and Economics
BA in Politics and Economics

There are no issues the Panel requires addressing in making these recommendations. However, as has been noted, there are a series of recommendations that the Panel considers desirable and would advise the School to make. These recommendations are:

1. the School to reflect upon ways in which the BA in War Peace and International Relations might be made more distinct and to consider how this can be
communicated effectively to potential applicants including re-branding in order to improve student recruitment;

2. the use of an even greater diversity of voices and perspectives across the curriculum, including more writers from the developing world;

3. in the joint degrees ‘BA in International Relations and Economics’ and ‘BA in Politics and Economics’, the School considers a greater emphasis in the curriculum on political economy;

4. the School seeks to deliver the basic academic skills, currently in the Study of Politics module, at Part 1 on a pervasive basis as part of one or more of the Part 1 modules;

5. the School re-positions the Study of Politics module to deal with undergraduate-level research skills training;

6. the School should do more to be innovative in developing other modes of summative coursework to sit alongside the essay in order to assess a wider range of transferable skills such as oral presentations, group projects and simulations;

7. the School reviews its blind double marking policy, and considers adopting the University approach of moderation, and uses the resource savings achieved to help address some of the other recommendations of this report;

8. the School undertakes a formal mapping exercise to improve the connections between learning outcomes at module and those at programmes level and to articulate how the assessment regimes across the programme enable students to demonstrate the breadth of learning outcomes.

9. the School might consider, where there is scope within the curriculum, how it might broaden the range of learning and teaching methods currently employed;

10. the School needs to do much more to embrace the Careers Management Skills module (CMS), by ensuring that it is led by a member of academic staff in the School and to establish a context in which its value and relevance is evident to students;

11. the School should assure itself that its procedures are appropriate for ensuring that course reading packs are not in breach of copyright law;

12. the School is encouraged to develop a baseline on the minimum content that should be made available on each module on Blackboard to students;

13. the School reconSIDERS how it best engages with the types of employers that reflect the variety of career aspirations held by its current and recent graduates such as working with alumni, professional contacts and the careers advisory service;

14. the School considers establishing a yearly meeting to consider both quantitative and qualitative student management information in the round, and to reflect strategically upon the ways in which programmes can be enhanced;

15. The School should consider developing a ‘road map’ for future developments covering, say, the next 5 years to assist the School in creating a short and medium term plan for change.

12. Recommendation for the University

The Panel believes that as a mechanism for bringing the Pathfinder process ‘full circle’ the University should be providing Schools with guidance on building ‘road maps’ for future development as indicate in the final recommendation for the School.