

# Periodic Review of the Department of English Literature

## Introduction

- 1 An internal review of programmes in the Department of English Literature was held on 22 and 23 July 2014. The members of the Panel were:
  - Dr Eugene McSorley, Associate Professor, School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences (*Chair*)
  - Dr Jason Harding, Reader, Department of English Studies, University of Durham (*external member, subject specialist*)
  - Professor Anne Varty, Professor in Victorian Literature, Department of English, Royal Holloway (*external member, subject specialist*)
  - Dr Matthew Nicholls, Associate Professor, Department of Classics (*internal member*)
  - Mrs Alison Nader, Lecturer, International Study and Language Institute (*internal member*)
  - Mr Jamie Gostlow, Part 2 BA History and International Relations, University of Reading
  - Ms Jennie Chetcuti, Senior Quality Support Officer, Centre for Quality Support and Development (*Secretary*).
  
- 2 The Panel met the following members of staff:
  - Professor Peter Robinson, Head of Department
  - Dr Stephen Thomson, Department Director of Teaching and Learning
  - Dr Andrew Nash, School Director of Teaching and Learning
  - Dr Cindy Becker, Placement Tutor and Careers Learning Tutor
  - Dr Rebecca Bullard, Part 1 Director and Examinations Officer
  - Dr John Holmes, Part 3 Exams Officer
  - Professor Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, Professor of Critical Theory, Director of Postgraduate Studies, Director of CIRCL, Disability Representative
  - Dr Andrew Mangham, Part 2 Exams Officer
  - Dr Mary Morrissey, Associate Professor and Admissions Tutor
  - Miss Anna Richards, Liaison Librarian, Arts and Humanities.
  
- 3 The Panel met current students and recent graduates who represented the following degree programmes:
  - BA English Literature
  - BA English Literature (part-time)

- MA (Research) Children's Literature.

## General observations

- 4 The Review Panel was provided with extensive documentation relating to the programmes under review in a timely manner. The Review Team was also given access to a range of teaching and learning and assessment materials during the Review visit. Requests for further information were responded to quickly and efficiently by the Department.
- 5 The Panel met with a range of teaching and learning and support staff during the Review process and would wish to express its gratitude to all those who participated. All staff engaged in the discussions in an open and constructive manner and it was clear to the Panel that there was strong sense of community across the Department at all levels [**Good Practice f**].
- 6 The Panel met with a small sample of current students and recent graduates who were confident, articulate and fully supportive of the programmes under review. The students made a number of constructive suggestions for further improvements to the provision and the Panel would wish to express its thanks to them for their valuable input.
- 7 The Panel noted the particular context within which the Review took place; the English Studies Project had been established by the University in November 2013 to explore, in collaboration with English Studies staff, how student recruitment to English could be enhanced. The Panel noted the Department's plans to foreground and build on existing areas of strength in the undergraduate curriculum through the introduction of further pathway degrees to complement the existing Creative Writing pathway. In this context, the Panel welcomed the Department's continued strong commitment to maintaining and developing its 'core' benchmark provision.

## Academic standards of the programmes

### Educational aims of the provision and the learning outcomes

- 8 The Panel was provided with evidence in the form of programme specifications, programme handbooks and External Examiners' reports. These, along with discussions with staff and students, reading of students' work and the Panel's own deliberations, confirmed that the academic standards of programmes were being met.
- 9 The Panel confirmed that the programmes were appropriately designed in relation to published subject benchmarking statements and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.
- 10 The Panel reviewed the academic aims and learning outcomes of the programmes. From inspection of students' work and discussion with students, the Panel concluded that aims and outcomes were clear and appropriate. External Examiners' reports verified that aims and outcomes were communicated to students.
- 11 The Panel commends the Department on its evident strength in the development of expertise in global English literatures and on its response and careful management of adjustments made since the last Periodic Review in 2008.

## Curricula and assessment

### Curricula

- 12 The Panel commends the coherence, breadth and scope of the curricula, including the requirement for undergraduate students to engage with literatures pre-1789 during Parts 1 and 2. The Panel was supportive of the proposed curriculum changes at Part 1, the streaming of students into chosen more specialised pathways, and the extension of the number of credits taken within the Department to 100 credits at Part 1. At the same time, the Panel advises the Department to keep these changes under review.
- 13 The Panel supported the range of Part 3 options and the opportunity for all staff to offer research-led teaching [**Good Practice g**]. However, it **recommends** that the Department should continue to reflect on the pedagogic rationale of what is offered, while bearing in mind the most effective use of staff time [**Recommendation c**]. The Panel also advises the Department to give further consideration to ways in which the diversity of choice available to students in Part 3 might be more actively monitored or guided.
- 14 The Panel saw evidence in the form of students' work and heard from discussions with staff and students that content and design were informed by recent developments in teaching and learning and the latest scholarship. It concluded that the delivery of the curricula was appropriate to the students recruited and provided ample opportunity to demonstrate achievement of knowledge and understanding, intellectual, practical and transferable skills.
- 15 As stated in paragraphs 7 and 12 above, the Panel commends the core provision of the undergraduate curriculum and welcomes the Department's well-conceived plans for phased growth of the breadth of provision, reinforcing existing strengths in the curriculum [**Good Practice d**]. The Panel warmly supported the deliberate design of this planned growth and recommends careful phased management of changes to the design and operation of programmes. It **recommends** that the Department consider appointing an additional External Examiner to support new or enhanced areas of the curriculum [**Recommendation d**].
- 16 The Panel also **recommends** that the Department should identify distinctive areas of excellence in its provision and communicate these more explicitly to current and prospective students and other stakeholders [**Recommendation a**].

### Assessment

- 17 The Panel noted that the essay remained at the core of the assessment for many modules and that the typical pattern of assessment was: formative essay followed by summative essay followed by essays written in examination conditions. However, the Panel also saw examples of other forms of assessment, including learning journals and reports on academic placements, and was impressed by the standard of much of the work. Feedback from External Examiners confirmed the standard of student work. The Panel heard that staff were trialling other new forms of summative assessment; for example, oral presentations and screencasts. Currently, students have the opportunity to give oral presentations, which are formatively assessed. It was clear from the Panel's meeting with undergraduate students that they would like presentation skills to be included as part of the range of summative assessments.
- 18 While recognizing the continued benefits of traditional forms of teaching and assessment, the Panel commends the Department's use of innovative forms of teaching and assessment and the quality of work these can produce, including the adoption of new technologies where appropriate [**Good Practice h**]. The Panel advises

the Department to continue to evaluate and adopt new forms of assessment, and to offer students variety in their summative assessments while maintaining a strong focus on quality assurance and upholding rigorous standards.

### Use of student management information

- 19 The Panel noted that the Department makes appropriate use of statistical data, External Examiners' Reports, student evaluations, and the National Student Survey (NSS). It has appropriate mechanisms in place for student representation, including a Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) which meets twice a year and student representation on the Board of Studies, in accordance with University policy. It was clear to the Panel that the views of External Examiners are taken into account and have informed a number of recent changes to the curriculum and to teaching and learning and assessment practices.
- 20 The Panel considered that there was clear and identifiable evidence of the collection and use of student feedback and evaluation. The Department regularly reviews module evaluation. SSLC minutes are received by the Board of Studies and responses to, and actions arising from, student evaluation are documented and reported back to the SSLC. The Panel was pleased to note a number of examples of student engagement in curriculum development: for example, the introduction in 2013-14 of the compulsory Part 1 Research and Criticism module incorporating content from a previous Part 2 module and the trial of independent study groups alongside seminars in Part 2 were influenced by student feedback from the SSLC.
- 21 In addition to the formal mechanisms in place for monitoring and evaluating provision, it was clear to the Panel that there was an excellent collegiate spirit in the Department, with good practice being shared and decisions reached through discussion and collaboration.

## Quality of learning opportunities offered by the programmes

### Teaching and learning

- 22 The Panel commends the Department on its research-led teaching, particularly in Part 3, and on its innovative use of specialist archives in undergraduate teaching [**Good Practice g and k**]. The Panel encourages the Department to make its use of archives in teaching more prominent in marketing literature as a distinctive feature of its programmes (see also paragraph 16 above).
- 23 The Panel recognised the clear progression through the programmes to dissertation work and commends the thoroughness and level of support for the planning and writing of dissertations [**Good Practice j**]. The new, more coherent system of dissertation support introduced in 2013-14 offers students a variety of opportunities to discuss their dissertations at various stages, starting with lectures focussing on use of the library and resource tools at the start of the Spring Term of Part 2, through to Week 3 of the Spring Term in Part 3.
- 24 The Panel welcomed the establishment of independent study groups linked to seminars at Part 2 which encourages autonomous learning and group work outside class time. The Panel **recommends** that the discussions from these groups be further embedded into the linked seminars [**Recommendation e**]. Following on from staff comments, the Panel also encourages the Department to consider the possibilities that the independent study groups offer for flipped learning.

- 25 It was clear to the Panel that small group teaching and one-to-one feedback were a hallmark of the Department and valued by staff and students alike. Students also mentioned how much they valued contact with the Literary Fellows. The Panel noted that the Department's considered use of the personal tutor system also contributed to high academic standards. The Panel advises the Department to reflect carefully on how its ethos of individual attention to students can be safeguarded, if student numbers are to increase. The Panel encourages the Department to further develop some of its existing forms of contact e.g. the independent study group.
- 26 The Panel concluded that provision for students with disabilities was appropriate and formed the subject of ongoing reflection by the Department. Since 2013-14, the Equality Committee meets termly, and reports to the Department Meeting.

### Feedback to Students

- 27 The Panel recognised the impressive increase in student satisfaction as evidenced in the findings of the NSS 2013 in relation to both quality and promptness of feedback and commends the Department on its achievements in this area. External Examiners and the students themselves expressed satisfaction with the detail of marking and annotation and students with whom the Panel met particularly mentioned that they valued the one-to-one feedback sessions for formative essays. The Panel wishes to highlight the continued high level and quality of feedback as a particular feature of good practice within the Department [**Good Practice i**].
- 28 The Panel nevertheless felt that the Department should consider providing students with a more structured feedback form and clearly articulated, bespoke marking criteria for different types of assessment. It therefore **recommends** that the Department should introduce a structured, although unrestrictive, feedback form to include clear feed-forward on *Strengths* and *Areas for Improvement*. Standard marking criteria could be included on the reverse. The Panel also recommends that a single standard feedback form is attached to both formative and summative essays [**Recommendation f**]. A single standard form would assist the students in using the feedback to feed forwards and would help to ensure consistency in feedback, particularly where there is more than one marker per module or where less experienced staff are marking. In addition, it could help to make the feedback system more sustainable as the ratio of students to staff is set to increase. The Panel noted that further information on communication of assessment criteria and use of feedback forms was included in the University's *Policy on providing feedback to students on their performance*. The Panel also noted that the Department might wish to evaluate their feedback procedures using the University's Engage in Feedback audit tool: [http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/EngageinFeedback/final\\_audit\\_tool\\_28\\_05\\_09.pdf](http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/EngageinFeedback/final_audit_tool_28_05_09.pdf).

### **Student admission and progression**

- 29 The Panel was satisfied that effective arrangements for admission, induction and transition were in place, and that the Department was working to incorporate the new format for Welcome Week. The Panel considered that student progression was appropriate and consistent with the intended learning outcomes.
- 30 The Panel was pleased to hear that the Department's considerable efforts to improve its undergraduate admissions position were bearing fruit for 2014-15, beginning the reversal of a period of decline. This was attributed to a significant improvement in conversion, resulting from substantial Departmental efforts in relation to recruitment and outreach [**Good Practice b**], and liaison with an improved central admissions operation. The Panel wished to encourage the Department in its next steps to widen

the pool of applicants via continued advertising and outreach operations, and by carefully considering the attractiveness and distinctiveness of programmes (see also paragraph 16). The Panel also welcomed efforts underway within the Department to improve recruitment to postgraduate taught programmes.

- 31 The Panel was pleased to note that senior staff at Departmental and School level were mindful of the considerable demands placed on staff with responsibility for admissions in recent years. In this context, the Panel wished to commend the continuing efforts within the Department to defend staff research time against ongoing centrally-driven activity [**Good Practice a**].
- 32 The Panel noted the substantial influx of students from Joint Honours programmes onto the Single Honours programme at Part 2, which the Department viewed, not unreasonably, as an endorsement of its attractiveness. The Panel expressed some caution, lest the Department find itself accepting a significant number of students whose entry qualifications were lower than the entry tariff for Single Honours English. Discussions with staff clarified that until recently, it had been possible for students to enter Joint Honours programmes with a lower tariff than for the Single Honours programme (and to then transfer to the Single Honours programme at the beginning of Part 2); however, this issue had since been addressed.
- 33 The Panel concluded on the basis of the available evidence that appropriate academic support for students, including written guidance, was in place, although the Panel noted that students were not always fully conversant with details of the course handbooks, including programme specifications and marking descriptors. The Panel considered that this was by no means a problem unique to this Department, which had made good efforts to incorporate the new Student Charter, for example, into its communications with students.

### Learning resources

- 34 On the basis of its investigations, the Panel concluded that the collective expertise of the academic staff encompassed a variety of styles and approaches and allowed very effective delivery of the curricula and achievement of the intended learning outcomes. The Panel noted that the Department was well served by a dedicated administrative team located within the same corridor space as the academic offices.
- 35 The last Periodic Review Report and the response from the Department had noted the need to achieve a greater consistency of Blackboard use and provision. Since then, the Panel noted that Blackboard usage had grown among academic staff within the Department. There remained considerable variety in the level and depth of engagement with Blackboard but this was seen by students and staff as a natural consequence of different pedagogical approaches and subject materials, and not as a problem.
- 36 As noted in paragraphs 17 and 18, the Department makes use of a commendable variety of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and is confident both in the development and deployment of innovative, technologically-driven approaches and, where appropriate, in conventional teaching styles and materials. The Panel noted that as the Department embraces more technologically driven tools like screen-casting, it may become necessary to consider the local provision of suitable facilities where possible.
- 37 The Panel commends the Library and online resource provision for the Department's programmes as an area of good practice. The support from successive Library Liaison

Officers was singled out for praise in the Panel's discussions with current students and recent graduates [**Good practice e**].

- 38 However, the Panel expressed some concern at the difficulties experienced by part-time and Masters level students in accessing the Library during the Summer vacation. It **recommends** that the University consider the adverse impact of restricted weekend and evening opening hours on these groups of students in particular [**Recommendation to the University a**].
- 39 The Panel also noted the concern expressed by staff and students at the lack of a common room space within the Department. It **recommends** that the University recognise this concern and its impact on the Department's efforts to create a cohesive and friendly academic community [**Recommendation to the University b**].

### Employer engagement

- 40 The Panel was very impressed with the innovative academic placement scheme which was compulsory for those students taking the Communications at Work module (11 students in 2013-14) and optional for the other Part 2 and Part 3 modules (19 students in 2013-14, up from 6 during the previous year) [**Good Practice c**]. Departmental staff were clearly able to articulate the pedagogic value of these course-related academic placements, with the project being the most popular form of placement undertaken. The Panel also noted the obvious career benefits to students which were reflected in public displays within the Department. Students are given the opportunity to develop a number of employment-related skills, not least through the requirement to find and arrange their own placements.
- 41 The number of students undertaking placements has to date been relatively small. Given that this number is set to rise, the Panel **recommends** that the Department should build on existing good practice in the management of placement provision to ensure sustainability [**Recommendation b**].
- 42 The Panel heard that the Department was participating in a pilot whereby placement details could be recorded on RISIS, but it noted that placement information could not currently be automatically added to the Diploma Supplement Annex.

### Enhancement of quality and academic provision

- 43 The Panel concluded that there was clear evidence that the Department took deliberate steps to enhance the quality of provision and took care to identify and use examples of good and effective practice. It noted that there were themed Away Days with clear topics which were identified on the basis of need. The Department also contributed to termly School Teaching and Learning Showcases on good practice.
- 44 The Panel confirmed that student engagement had improved throughout the Review period. Student representatives were now included in the membership of the Board of Studies. The Panel saw evidence of a direct impact of the SSLC on provision and of student engagement in curriculum development, including the shift of Part 2 module content into the Part 1 Research and Criticism module (also referred to in paragraph 20 above), which was cited as exemplary practice. A number of other initiatives had also been introduced since the previous Periodic Review including Student Ambassadors, who contributed to the Department's recruitment and outreach activities and for whom training and formal recognition had recently been improved.
- 45 The Panel noted that the Department had an appropriate forward-looking plan in place for developing its academic provision over the next three academic years. As

noted above, this is embedded in the English Project which represents a sensible plan for expansion, the introduction of which will be phased-in slowly in a measured manner.

## Main characteristics of the programmes under review

- 46 The Panel considers that the programmes under review:
- a) are informed by recent developments in teaching and learning and up-to-date research;
  - b) provide an appropriate balance of 'core' benchmarked provision and diversity of choice;
  - c) make appropriate use of Library and online resource provision and of specialist archives;
  - d) provide appropriate opportunities for students to develop as independent learners and to demonstrate achievement of knowledge and understanding, practical and transferable skills;
  - e) draw upon a commendable variety of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment including traditional styles and materials and more innovative, technology-enhanced methods;
  - f) are underpinned by a strong ethos of individual attention to students, valued by staff and students alike.
- 47 The Department has made a number of changes to the undergraduate curriculum in recent years and plans for further changes arising from the English Project are well-conceived, measured and grounded in pedagogical aims.

## Conclusions on innovation and good practice

- 48 The Panel identifies the following areas as representing particularly good practice:
- a) the continuing efforts within the Department to defend staff research time against ongoing centrally-driven activity;
  - b) the Department's substantial efforts in relation to recruitment and outreach;
  - c) the pioneering academic placement provision;
  - d) the Department's well-conceived plans for phased expansion, grounded in educational aims;
  - e) the Library and online resource provision and in particular the Library Liaison Officers, who received unsolicited strong praise from students;
  - f) the strong sense of community across the Department at all levels;
  - g) the use of research-led teaching;

- h) the use of innovative forms of teaching and assessment alongside traditional forms and the quality of work these can produce, including the adoption of new technologies where appropriate;
- i) the continued high level and quality of feedback, reflected by recent improvements in NSS scores;
- j) the thoroughness and level of support for dissertations;
- k) the Department's innovative use of specialist archives in undergraduate teaching.

## Conclusions on quality and standards

- 49 The Review 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 obtained by students, and that the programme specifications are appropriate.

## Recommendations

- 50 The Panel **recommends** to the Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Science that the following degree programmes be re-approved to run for a further six years:
- BA English Literature
  - BA English Literature (part-time)
  - MA (Research) English
  - MA (Research) Children's Literature
  - MA (Research) Early Modern Literature and Drama
  - MA (Research) Modern and Contemporary Writing
  - MA Nineteenth-Century Literature & Culture: Relocating Modernity.
- 51 The Panel also **recommends** that the following degree programmes be re-approved to run until such time as the next Periodic Review is held of the relevant subject area:
- BA Art and English Literature
  - BA Classical Studies and English Literature
  - BA English Language and Literature
  - BA English Literature and European Literature and Culture
  - BA English Literature and Film & Theatre
  - BA English Literature and German
  - BA English Literature and International Relations
  - BA English Literature and Italian
  - BA English Literature and Politics
  - BA English Literature with French

- BA French and English Literature
  - BA History and English Literature
  - BA History of Art and English Literature
  - BA Philosophy and English Literature.
- 52 The Panel does not consider that any recommendations must be addressed as a condition of re-approval.
- 53 The Panel makes the following **recommendations** to the University:
- a) The University should consider the adverse impact of weekend and evening opening hours of the Library during vacation times, particularly on part-time and Masters level students;
  - b) The University should recognise the Department's proper concern that the configuration of its physical spaces and in particular the current lack of a common room space impacts upon its efforts to create a cohesive and friendly academic community.
- 54 The Panel has identified the following actions which it **recommends** the Department addresses:
- Advisable actions:**
- a) The Panel commends the core provision of the undergraduate curriculum and the current plans for its development. The Department should identify distinctive areas of excellence and communicate these more explicitly;
  - b) The Department should build on existing good practice in the management of placement provision to ensure sustainability;
  - c) The Panel commends the range of Part 3 options and the opportunity for all staff to offer research-led teaching. The Department should continue to reflect on the pedagogic rationale of what is offered, while bearing in mind the most effective use of staff time;
  - d) The Department should consider appointing an additional External Examiner to support new or enhanced areas of the curriculum;
  - e) Discussions from independent study groups at Part 2 should be clearly integrated into seminars;
  - f) The Department should introduce a single standard feedback form for both summative and formative assessments. The form should be structured to include clear feed-forward on *Strengths* and *Areas for Improvement*. Standard marking criteria could be included on the reverse.
- 55 The Panel does not have a recommendation to the Joint Faculty Board for Teaching and Learning in Arts, Humanities and Social Science as to whether any proposal(s) for new degree programmes should be approved as this is not applicable.