

# PERIODIC REVIEW OF ECONOMICS

## Reviewing programmes delivered by the Department of Economics in the School of Politics, Economics and International Relations

### Introduction

1. An internal review of programmes in Economics was held on 8 and 9 February. The members of the Panel were:
  - Professor Ellie Highwood, Professor of Climate Physics and University Dean of Diversity, Department of Meteorology (*Chair*)
  - Professor Ólan Henry, University of Liverpool (*external member, subject specialist*)
  - Professor Stephen Pavelin, University of Bath (*external member, subject specialist*)
  - Dr Helen Bilton, Associate Professor of Education, Institute of Education (*internal member*)
  - Dr Tim Lees, School Director of Teaching and Learning, School of the Built Environment (*internal member*)
  - Ms Amy Bannister, MChem Chemistry, Department of Chemistry (*student panellist*)
  - Mr Richard Sandford, Senior Quality Support Officer, Centre for Quality Support and Development (*secretary*)
2. The Panel met the following:
  - Professor Uma Kambhampati (*Head of School*)
  - Professor Giovanni Razzu (*Head of Department*)
  - Dr Simon Burke (*School Director of Teaching and Learning*)
  - Dr Sarah Jewell (*Department Director of Teaching and Learning*)
  - Dr James Reade (*Undergraduate Director of Studies*)
  - Dr Ken Dark (*Undergraduate Admissions Tutor*)
  - Alessandra Ferrari (*Undergraduate Examinations Officer*)
  - Dr Nigel Wadeson (*Postgraduate Director of Studies*)
  - Dr Mark Guzman (*Postgraduate Examinations Officer*)
  - Mrs Vicki Wiles (*Placement Co-ordinator*)
  - Dr Stefania Lovo
  - Dr Sophie Clot
  - Dr Sam Rawlings
  - Dr Minyan Zhu
  - Dr Vivien Burrows
  - Dr Zahra Siddique
3. The Panel met students who represented the following degree programmes:
  - BA Economics
  - BA International Relations and Economics

- BSc Business Economics
  - BSc Economics
  - BSc Economics and Econometrics
  - MA in Public Policy
  - MSc in Business Economics
  - MSc Economics
4. The Panel also met recent graduates who had graduated from the following degree programmes between 2015 and 2016:
- BA Economics
  - BA Economics (with Placement Experience)
  - BSc Economics
  - BSc Economics (with Placement Experience)
  - BSc Economics and Econometrics
  - MSc Emerging and Developing Economies

## **General observations**

5. The Review Panel met with a diverse range staff, students and alumni over the course of the review. Staff were fully engaged with the review process and provided the Panel with a welcoming environment within which to work. The Review Panel benefitted from a detailed and well-organised Blackboard organisation, which was invaluable in reviewing the Department's activities. Any requests for additional materials or information during the course of the Review were met with alacrity. The Panel extends its thanks to all staff involved in the Review and in the development (and maintenance) of the Blackboard organisation.
6. The Panel was very impressed by the quality and engagement of the students and alumni whom they met with over the course of the Review. The Panel thanks the students they met, and those who contributed to the written Student Submission, for their valuable input to the Review. The students and alumni demonstrated a passion for the subject and a clear affection for the Department.
7. The Panel noted that the Department is part of the School of Politics, Economics and International Relations, having separated from the Henley Business School in 2011. The Panel recognised that the two Departments have separate and distinct identities, but are involved in exploring and developing multidisciplinary synergies in both research and teaching.
8. The Department has experienced significant growth since their last Periodic Review. The Department currently has 26 Full-time members of academic staff, 543 undergraduate students (271 of which are Joint Honours students), and 49 taught postgraduate students. The Department saw larger than expected growth in undergraduate student number in the current academic session, owing, in part, to an unexpected increase in numbers on Joint Honours programmes.
9. The Panel noted that the Department had embarked upon a programme of restructuring its offering since the last Periodic Review. This had seen the removal and subsequent reintroduction of the BA Economics as well as the introduction of new programmes and restructuring of existing ones.
10. In 2014/5 the Department undertook an Economics Teaching Review which focused on its teaching in quantitative methods and mathematics. The aim of the review was to address concerns around pass rates for part 1 modules in those areas. The Panel was satisfied that the reviews findings are being implemented. The Panel also noted that the Department has already seen an upturn in student performance in mathematics, which the Department attributes to more frequent assessment and feedback.
11. The Panel noted that student feedback on modules regularly highlights the enthusiasm of lecturers as well as their helpfulness and approachability. During meetings with students, and

through the student submission, it was evident that students were fond of the staff and held them in high regard, as well as being proud of the Department and the achievements of its staff.

12. This sense of community and mutual respect was further evident during meetings with staff and through the Self-Evaluation Document. The Panel found that students exhibited concern for student welfare and were responsive to student concerns **[good practice a]**.

## **Academic standards of the programmes**

### **Committee structures**

13. The Panel was satisfied that the committee structures within the School and Department were appropriate and in line with University expectations, providing an effective mechanism for the quality management and enhancement of programmes.
14. The Panel heard that there is broad staff engagement with the committees (especially at undergraduate level). Staff at all levels felt that they had ample opportunities to feed into the management and enhancement of programmes. Similarly, there is suitable provision for student representation within the committee structures.
15. The Panel heard that whilst major decisions are made by the Department Management Committee other members of staff from outside the core membership are co-opted for their specialist knowledge in considering certain issues.
16. The Panel noted a Teaching and Learning Enhancement Group operates on an ad hoc basis, addressing emerging issues through working groups. The Group's findings are reported back to the Department Management Committee.
17. The Panel found that the minutes of the meetings provided evidence that the committees were satisfactorily fulfilling their responsibilities in respect of quality management and enhancement. The Panel noted that the committees give appropriate consideration to external examiner reports, NSS and PTES results, annual programme reports and other management information materials.

### **Programme design**

18. The Panel received and considered programme specifications, module descriptions, programme handbooks, External Examiners' reports and samples of student work and feedback. Additionally, the Panel had the opportunity to speak with staff and students within the Department. On the basis of the Panel's deliberations on this evidence the Panel was able to confirm that the academic standards of the programmes under review were appropriate and comparable to programmes on offer at other universities.
19. The Panel considered that the, overall, the degree programmes offered were coherent and of appropriate scope. The Panel found evidence that the Department had given significant consideration to the QAA Subject Benchmarks<sup>1</sup>, the University's Curriculum Framework, and how key economic concepts can be imparted to their students, in the design of their curriculum.
20. The Panel noted that the Department had showed a willingness to restructure their offering in light of market drivers and pedagogical considerations. This includes removing programmes from the portfolio (MSc in Economics of Climate Change) owing to poor recruitment.
21. The Panel felt that the development of programmes in the wake of the establishment of the Henley Business School (and subsequent establishment of Economics as a Department separate from that unit) had been largely coherent and neatly aligned with the constraints and opportunities within the new institutional environment. As noted above the Department has considered a number of factors, both internal and external, in the development of its programmes.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Economics-15.pdf>

22. The Panel noted that the design and content of the undergraduate programmes has been informed not only by the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements but also surveys of employers by the Economics Network and key concepts identified by the Core project<sup>2</sup>. There is an enhanced emphasis on inculcating certain key threshold concepts (ie foundational concepts which are needed in order to progress) and developing a sense of the interconnectedness of concepts and ideas in the discipline.
23. The Panel recognised that the new joint programmes within SPEIR (eg BA in Politics and Economics and MA in Public Policy) and with HBS (eg BSc and MSc in Economics and Finance), reflect an awareness of synergies and a willingness to exploit them **[good practice b]**. These activities allow the Department's programmes to draw more widely upon expertise outside the Department that fits with, and extends, that of the Economics faculty.
24. The Panel was impressed by the Department's work on restructuring the portfolio and found it to be well thought out and delivered. The Panel noted that work was ongoing in this area (especially with regards the postgraduate portfolio). Overall, the Panel would commend the departments work in this area **[good practice c]**.
25. During the Review the Panel explored questions around the identity of the BA Economics and the BSc Economics, and how these offerings were differentiated. The Panel noted that both staff and students habitually made the distinction between the two programmes through a reference to a dearth of mathematical and statistical analysis in the BA Economics. The Panel found that the role of the BA Economics highlighted omissions (including technical skills and content) rather than distinctive inclusions.
26. The Panel felt that the difference could be more positively framed and, in questioning staff and students, found that there was indeed a deeper understanding of the differences. The application of the 'short-hand' description was felt to be unhelpful, especially when it was being used in the marketing of the programmes (especially at Open and Visit Days). Additionally, the Panel noted that the BA Economics was sometimes referred to as a 'parachute' programme for students if they struggle with the mathematical elements of the BSc programmes. As such, the Panel recommends that the Departments explores ways to establish distinctive identifies for each of the undergraduate programmes, and that these be framed in terms of the positive benefits of studying those programmes that were well articulated by both staff and students during the review **[advisable recommendation a]**.
27. The Panel noted that the BA Economics offers more module choice and a greater focus on policy, social issues and institutions which means that students develop a more applied and global view of economics. The Panel were impressed by the practical applications available to students on the BA Economics, including module content focusing on Excel and others focusing on the real-world application of economic theories and impacts of policy **[good practice d]**. The students appreciated the Excel module in particular and in fact students on the other programmes also felt that this would be useful to them.
28. Similarly, the Panel noted that the undergraduate BSc programmes afford students the opportunities to develop a range of technical skills, which fully equip them for employment as professional economists. Students appreciated being able to immerse themselves in the theoretical and technical aspects of their programme and thus develop their statistical and analytical skills **[good practice e]**.
29. The Panel noted that across the portfolio of postgraduate programmes there was a mix of progression and conversion models. However, these models seem to be confused within MSc Economics, leading to some dissatisfaction amongst some students. In particular, the programme currently runs using several modules and considerable content that is more tailored to a conversion audience, which was mismatched with the students who had been attracted to the programme on the understanding that it was a progression programme. The Department recognises this issue

---

<sup>2</sup><http://www.core-econ.org/>

- and notes that, in part, it stems from the restructuring of their offering and their need to provide programmes which were appealing to an international audience. The move from eight distinct programmes to two programmes had seen a move to a more traditional offering and, in turn, better quality applicants, however the module content on occasion lags behind this different cohort.
30. The Panel felt that the design of the MSc Economics does not provide consistent progression from the BSc in Economics. It should be revised to offer such progression by largely removing overlap with the undergraduate provision. To facilitate this, the Department may also consider that revisions in module content should be complemented by: a reconsideration of entry requirements; additional support on technical skills; and a shift in marketing **[advisable recommendation b]**.
31. The Panel noted the Department's involvement with the Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology (NUIST) Joint Academy. The Department was at the forefront of this University wide initiative, with the full collaboration growing from their Departmental partnership with NUIST. The Panel commends the Department's continuing engagement with this enterprise and its commitment to internationalisation of the curriculum. The Panel noted that the Department has embarked on an innovative activity with its students to help improve the student experience of those NUIST students coming to Reading (and the Reading cohort who will be receiving them). The Department has employed NUIST Student Ambassadors to visit China and help prepare the Chinese students for their time in the UK. The ambassadors have been providing support in the classroom in China as well as forming relationships with the incoming students. The Panel was greatly impressed by this initiative and felt that other Schools involved in the NUIST activities could investigate adopting similar activities **[good practice f]**.

### **Assessment and feedback**

32. Through a consideration of the External Examiner's reports, the Panel was satisfied that the standards achieved by learners meet the minimum expectations for awards, as measured against the relevant Subject Benchmarking Statements and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. The Panel was content that the Department gives full consideration to feedback from the External Examiners and instigates changes where appropriate. The Department noted that External Examiner feedback has been particularly useful in amending procedures at undergraduate level (especially around the low marking of student work) and in redesigning the postgraduate portfolio.
33. The Panel was pleased to note a broad range of assessment methods being used by the Department. The Department has clearly given a lot of thought to matching appropriate assessments to modules.
34. The Panel heard that the Department has introduced a set of general rules to help Module Convenors when they design assessments for their modules. There is an expectation that the rules are adhered to, and any deviation must be approved by the relevant Board of Studies. The rules were introduced in response to student perceptions that some modules had easier assessment loads. The rules help make sure that the assessment burden is similar across modules. The Panel noted that there is a good balance of coursework and final examinations at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
35. The Panel noted that the Department has put in place a number of measures to help ensure that students are aware of assessment criteria. In addition to including the information on the module descriptions the Department has also taken the following steps:
- uploading a 'feedback matrix' to Blackboard (giving students a minimum assessment criteria and baseline);
  - dedicating time in selected lectures to outlining the criteria; and,
  - delivering sessions during week six which are dedicated to explaining the assessment criteria for unusual assessments.

However, the Panel noted that some students were still unsure of the assessment criteria for particular modules, and especially for project-based assessments. This was reinforced by the

recent NSS results which showed a 59% rating for 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance' (Q5).

36. The problems of poor communication around assessment criteria is further exacerbated by student perceptions around the quality of feedback. Generally, students were positive about the quality of feedback received, but some commented that there are occasions when staff might rely on generic feedback.
37. Assessment and feedback scores in the NSS were in the range 55%-65% from 2012 to 2016 (with the Department's scores on a slight upward trajectory). The assessment and feedback scores for 2016 fall well below the University average of 71%, coming in at 65%. As well as scoring poorly on the 'clarity of criteria' (Q5) (as noted at paragraph 35 above), the Department also scored poorly for 'timeliness of feedback' (Q7), scoring only 56% for the latter.
38. The Department is aware that the timeliness of feedback is an issue. They have noted both the NSS data and the feedback turnaround data (which shows big differences in the amount of work returned on time during the Autumn and Spring terms of 2015/6). The Panel heard that staff are making a concerted effort to adhere to the 15 day deadline, but that there have been some exceptions. Most notably this has been due to managing workloads with large cohorts. The Panel noted that the Department will be providing additional support with marking for module convenors who are looking after modules with large cohorts. The Panel felt that it would also be useful to provide students with an expected hand-back date, in order to manage expectations and perceptions around the timeliness of feedback.
39. The Panel noted that monitoring of the 15 day turnaround of feedback had been carried out by the Department's Administration team, but that it would be carried out by the Student Support Centres going forward. The Panel heard that the monitoring of return of feedback had been a significant administrative burden which had led to some issues with collating the data. The Department indicated that hopefully such issues should not arise with the move to the Support Centres.
40. The Department has embraced online submission and marking of materials. Some modules with more mathematical content do not readily lend themselves to online submission, but the Department has trialled methods and processes to include these pieces of work (by scanning and submitting original pieces of work). The Department has been pleased with online submission, especially with regards to the reduction in the number of late submissions. The Panel noted that the Department has made great use of a formative piece of work using Turnitin to highlight issues around academic integrity with its undergraduate students and plans to roll out a similar exercise with their postgraduate students.
41. The Panel felt that the Department were taking steps to remedy any shortcoming in assessment and feedback. The Panel noted that as well as using feedback from external examiners as a catalyst for change, the Department was also looking at internal drivers for change. The Panel heard that the Peer Review process, Boards of Studies, and the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Group are examples of fora where issues around assessment and feedback are explored. The Panel recommends that the Department continues to review its assessment procedures in order to ensure clear and consistent approaches for:
  - a. Assessment briefs and marking criteria; and,
  - b. The delivery and quality of feedback **[advisable recommendation c]**.

## **Quality of learning opportunities offered by the programmes**

### **Teaching and learning**

42. The Panel was impressed by the quality of teaching and learning in the Department and noted from its meetings with students, and further evidence from the Student Submission, module evaluations

- and NSS/PTES results and qualitative responses, that students were generally satisfied with the quality of teaching on their programmes.
43. The Panel felt that staff research and scholarship were clearly embedded in teaching and learning, and that programmes were therefore very current and up to date. This was noted in both the external examiners' reports and through discussions with the students.
  44. Indeed, the Panel made note of the fact that the students were aware of, and impressed by, the research achievements of staff across a wide range of topics and approaches **[good practice g]**.
  45. The Department has noted continuing issues with student engagement. The Panel felt it would be beneficial to separate two issues: participation in (especially large) classes; and extra-curricular engagement with the discipline. On the latter, the Panel was impressed by the Department's efforts to increase student engagement opportunities. Such activities include the weekly lunchtime 'Conversations' sessions (where topical issues are explored by students at all levels of study with members of staff), support for the student-run Economics Society, NUIST Ambassadors, employing students Open Days and Visit Days (including giving talks), and recruiting students to research internships and UROP activities. The Department down-played these activities, noting that the most engaged students are the ones that attend, but the Panel felt that these were positive moves to include students in co- and extra-curricular activities and help foster a sense of community **[good practice h]**.
  46. The Panel noted that one area where students were particularly engaged was via the Tutorial system. The Panel heard that students valued that the additional opportunities to deepen understanding and enhance learning that these sessions afforded them **[good practice i]**.
  47. The Panel heard that the Department had explored various ways of interacting with larger groups and that successes had been shared amongst module teams. The Panel shared some of their experiences with the Department, especially around how to foster a sense of community amongst larger cohorts. Peer Assisted Learning activities were highlighted as possible avenues for the Department to explore – getting students to reflect upon and mark each other's work; anonymised response exercises; and getting students to mark and comment on their own work.
  48. The Panel felt that the Department could make profitable use of shared knowledge and experience within the Department to help address issues around delivering to large cohorts. Indeed, the Department could better exploit teaching and learning networks, both within and outside the University, to investigate ways to improve engagement of, and delivery to, large cohorts **[desirable recommendation g]**.
  49. The Panel noted that the shift to a younger age profile amongst academic staff was helping to foster a more dynamic and innovative teaching environment. The Department noted that staff across the Department were learning from each other and especially from the pedagogic innovations that staff were bringing back to the Department through their participation in the Academic Practice Programme.
  50. The Panel heard that new staff are allocated a mentor for research and for teaching. Additionally, they receive departmental guidelines on teaching and learning practice and the supporting committee structure within the Department. Those staff who are allocated tutor responsibilities attend training sessions and a termly meeting with the Departmental Director of Teaching and Learning.
  51. In its meeting with new staff the Panel were informed that those staff should be receiving a lighter workload in order to allocate time to completing the Academic Practice Programme. However, there was a great degree of uncertainty amongst those staff about whether their workload had actually been reduced, largely owing to confusion around how the workload model functions. The Panel suggests that the Department should work to ensure that the formulation and application of the workload model is made transparent to all staff (especially those at an early stage of their career **[advisable recommendation d]**).
  52. As noted above (assessment and feedback), the Panel found there to be a large number of staff engaged in reflecting upon developing teaching and learning. This was not only happening within

formal groups and fora, but also on a more informal basis, with colleagues undertaking the APP sharing their experiences with peers and more senior colleagues [good practice j].

53. Whilst the Department clearly values the contributions of its early career staff, and supports them through the promotions process, the Panel felt that there needs to be some further consideration of staff development. In order to facilitate continuing improvement in teaching and learning the Panel felt that the Department should take steps to identify and mentor potential candidates for key teaching and learning roles. The Department could provide significant indicators of its intentions to excel in teaching and learning through developing a succession plan for these key roles **[desirable recommendation h]**.

### **Student admission, retention, progression and attainment**

54. The Panel noted the large numbers recruited to the undergraduate courses and recognised the Department's efforts to meeting the challenges of delivery to large cohorts.
55. The Department expressed some concerns around the recruitment of international undergraduate students. The Panel noted that these numbers seemed low, especially when compared with international recruitment at the postgraduate level. However, given the large cohorts at undergraduate, and the expected arrival of students from NUIST, the Panel were not overly concerned by poor recruitment of international undergraduate students.
56. The Panel noted the Department's concerns over declining numbers of postgraduate students. The Panel heard that the applications to the postgraduate programmes have fallen from 1,470 (in 2011/2) to 383 (in 2015/6), with the offer rate remaining static at around 50% and conversion at 10%.
57. The Panel heard that the Department had gone some way in addressing the postgraduate recruitment issues through a restructuring of their offering (see also paragraph 24 above). The most significant change has been the move from eight separate programmes to two programmes (delivered solely by the Department, with a further two programmes delivered in partnership with other units) which are marketed at two distinct audiences. The Panel heard that when the Department separated from the Henley Business School a large proportion of their postgraduate offering was left with the Business School.
58. The Panel noted that the move to two programmes had precipitated discussions in the Department about the purpose of, and audience for, the programmes. As noted above (paragraph 29) the Department felt that they had not reached a satisfactory conclusion on these issues which had led to issues with marketing as well as programme content.
59. The Panel heard that the Department felt that the centralisation of marketing activities had also precipitated the downturn in postgraduate applications. The Department felt that this move had resulted in a more 'high-level' approach to marketing (ie focusing on the merits of studying at Reading, and giving prominence to the undergraduate offering) rather than on specific courses. It had also meant that there were less resources available for the maintenance of local websites and production of materials. However, the Panel noted that by working with the Henley Business School (on the new MSc in Economics and Finance) the Department would be able to utilise expertise and resource within that School for the marketing of the programme.
60. The Panel felt that the Department could benefit from reopening dialogue with Marketing, Communications and Engagement in order to ascertain what support could be provided in marketing their postgraduate programmes. This would help them further explore new markets and better exploit existing ones in the promotion of their programmes **[advisable recommendation b(iii)]**.
61. The Panel noted that the Department makes great use of Open Days and Visit Days to promote their programmes and explain their offering. Indeed, these events play a key role in helping them differentiate their BA Economics and BSc Economics offerings to prospective students (see also paragraph 26 above).



62. The Panel felt that the Visit Day activities offered a good insight into the Department's activities for prospective students. As noted elsewhere, the Panel felt that staff and students should be mindful of how they describe the differences between the BA Economics and the BSc Economics when speaking to prospective students – such discussions should be framed in terms of the positive merits of the programmes, rather than in terms of omissions.
63. The Panel noted that the Department is very active post-offer for postgraduate programmes in order to increase the number of conversions. As well as engaging in the centrally managed/mandated conversion activities, the Department conducts its own activities, including offering Skype chats to prospective students.
64. The Panel was impressed by the Welcome Week activities (especially the Meet the Lecturer and treasure hunt events), and noted that these were supplemented by the Department's own 'Welcome Back' session throughout the student journey.
65. The 'Welcome Back' sessions aim to build upon the Welcome Week activities and help ensure the smooth transition back into learning after term/year breaks. The sessions are led by the Department Director of Teaching and Learning with support from the School Director of Teaching and Learning. The Department uses these sessions to highlight to students the forthcoming challenges they may face and afford them the opportunity to raise any issues that they may have.
66. The 'Welcome Back' sessions are also used to help raise awareness of the facilities and support available to the students. The Panel heard that the staff use the sessions for a number of activities, including:
- Reporting on cohort progress;
  - delivering part-level feedback;
  - checking student understanding of issues around feedback and plagiarism;
  - communicating learning outcomes and programme aims;
  - elucidating progression rules (including the capping of module marks for retakes);
  - outlining processes for transfers; and,
  - disseminating various other degree/programme related matters.
- It was clear to the Panel that the sessions play a key role in helping students to consider their personal and professional development **[good practice k]**.
67. The Panel was impressed by arrangements for the induction of students from NUIST. The Panel were particularly impressed by the Student Ambassadors initiative which sees Reading students visit China to meet and support students before they come to the UK. The Panel noted that students involved in this initiative were particularly engaged and had greatly enjoyed the experience (see also paragraph 31 above).
68. The Panel was satisfied that student progression was appropriate to the stated aims of the programmes and consistent with the attainment of intended learning outcomes. On the whole, progression and attainment across the programmes was found to be satisfactory.
69. The Panel found evidence (in the form of annual programme reports and minutes from various committees) that the Department regularly reflects on the performance of its students. However, the Panel suggests that the Department might dedicate some further effort in exploring reasons why some students are failing to progress to their final year (with Part 2 being identified by the Department as a particular obstacle to progression).

### **Learning environment and student support**

70. The Panel found that the Department has a good cross-section of staff at a variety of different career stages. The Department benefits from research staff with a wide variety of interests with feeds into the Department's teaching. The Department continues to expand and a new recruit with expertise in banking has been appointed, with moves to appoint additional staff in other areas. The Panel noted that the Department has a large number of younger staff and early career researchers and found these staff to be enthusiastic and engaged (see also paragraph 49 above).

71. The Department's administrative support had changed this academic year as a result of the Professional and Administrative Service review, with teaching and learning administration and student support now provided centrally by the relevant Support Centre. The Panel noted that one of the unforeseen impacts of this change had been the lack of student-footfall in the Department, which was seen as a contributing factor in the ongoing difficulties with engendering a sense of belonging amongst students.
72. The Panel heard that the School has a dedicated Placements Officer. The Placement Officer provides support in the delivery of awareness sessions in Part 1 and Part 2, in finding and highlighting opportunities and supporting students when they are on placements. The Placements Officer was instrumental in the Department creating '...with a Placement Year' versions of the undergraduate programmes (see also paragraph 83 below).
73. The Panel noted that the Department had been ranked highly by students for the standard for learning resources available to them: with a score in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey of 87% for "Resources and Services" and a score in the National Student Survey of 86% for "Satisfaction with learning resources". The Department had noted that satisfaction with library resources had persistently received low marks in the surveys, but they planned to address this through increasing the number of ebooks (where available) and encouraging staff to engage with the Talis Aspire software.
74. The Panel heard that the Department is taking part in the ASK Adviser initiative run by the Study Advice team. The students informed the Panel that they found this resource to be incredibly useful, and that, alongside Study Advice and Maths Support, it is a key factor in student success. The Panel heard that the Department highlights these resources to their students at numerous junctures, including 'Welcome Back' sessions, Personal Tutorial meetings and seminars. The students viewed accessing these as ways to enhance their academic understanding and practices, rather than remedial support activities to be accessed in times of need. The Panel felt that the Department's work in highlighting these resources, and their benefits, meant that students were improving their chances of success **[good practice I]**.
75. The Panel heard that some students felt that some of their modules suffer from a lack of transparent leadership. This perception had arisen because of the way the modules had been taught with a number of lecturers delivering seemingly unconnected material over the course of the module. The students recognised that the Department had experienced difficulty in appointing a lecturer to deliver the module, but found the arrangements put in place (ie delivery by five different lecturers, some from outside of the Department) to be unsatisfactory. Whilst team teaching can be unavoidable, the Panel felt that there should be clear ownership for all modules and that a single point of contact should be communicated to the students on the module **[advisable recommendation e]**.
76. The Panel noted that students on the BA Economics appreciated the opportunity to learn how to use Excel. However, students on other programmes were not afforded this opportunity and there was a clear demand for training in Excel at a more advanced level from both students and staff. The Panel noted that there was no longer any central support for this activity and wondered if it might help the University's employability agenda to have courses in Excel available to students (either within programmes or on a co-curricular basis) **[advisable recommendation k(i)]**.
77. The Panel felt that there needs to be better support for large class teaching, especially with regards A/V facilities in large lecture rooms. The students reported that there had been instances where they had not been able to hear their lecturers and that the gap between state-of-the-art and other spaces was pronounced. The Panel recommends that the University checks the suitability of spaces (and A/V equipment therein) for the teaching of large classes **[advisable recommendation k(ii)]**.
78. The Panel heard that the Department has recently moved to using Stata as its principle software package for data analysis. Previously the Department had used a mix of packages, including EViews for statistical work. The Panel welcomed the move to the universal use of a single tool, and noted that the Department has amended teaching in order to accommodate the use of Stata across the

curriculum. However, the Panel noted that the restrictions of the site license meant that the package could only be used on PCs on Campus. This meant that the timings of essays requiring the use of the package had to be monitored (so as deadlines coincided with term dates) and that opportunities for effective group work were sometimes limited. The Panel recommends that the University investigates whether the site license is appropriate and if there could be other ways for students to access the Stata package from off-campus (and if these could be communicated to the Department's students) **[advisable recommendation k(iii)]**.

79. The Panel noted that students regularly make use of the study spaces already available to them (including the Library and booking unused rooms via Room Bookings). However, the Panel felt that a dedicated study space for postgraduate students would be enhance the student experience (by helping to develop a sense of belonging) and also be a useful tool in the recruitment of new postgraduate students to the University **[advisable recommendation k(iv)]**.

### **Employability**

80. According to the most recent<sup>3</sup> statistics from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DeLHE) survey, 77% of graduates from the undergraduate programmes were in graduate-level employment or continuing in education six months after completing their programme. The Panel noted that the response rate to the survey was 81%, which was just under the University average.
81. The Department expressed some disappointment at the fact that their DeLHE scores had dropped from the previous years. The Panel heard that the Department has sought to address the issue through a variety of measures including engagement with the University's Careers Service and the development of placement activities. The Panel noted that these responses are at an early stage and have not yet brought transformative change. The Panel noted that the Department is asking their students to consider their plans for employment at an earlier stage in their degree.
82. In addition to benefitting from a dedicated Placement Officer (see paragraph 72 above), the School has strong links with the central Careers Service and have an excellent working relationship with their dedicated Careers Consultancy Manager.
83. The Department, as of the 2016/7 session, has introduced '...with a Placement Year' versions of their undergraduate degree so their students can directly enter on to those programmes (ie available via UCAS) and not transfer on to a placement version midway through their programme. This should help bolster the uptake of placements amongst undergraduates. Students are supported in identifying and applying for placements. The Department sees these activities as a key recruitment tool and frequently fields questions on them at Open and Visit days.
84. The newly introduced '...with a Placement Year' programmes all include a non-credit bearing module. The aim of the module is to get students thinking about employability at an early stage of their studies and direct them to activities which will boost their employability (eg RED Award, volunteering and term-time employment).
85. Students in the Department are actively encouraged to also seek work experience opportunities for the summer period between Parts 1 and 2. This helps them refine their CVs ready for applications for placements or work after graduation.
86. The Panel noted that an application for a Partnerships in Learning & Teaching (PLanT) Project had been submitted by the Department. The project would see students develop their personal effectiveness and self-awareness through their careers. The project would focus on the development communication skills, including the students' ability to explain economics concepts and apply economic tools to real world problems. The Project would also see students develop other skills sought by employers, including Excel and technical skills.
87. The Department has developed several Undergraduate Research Opportunities Projects (UROP) since 2011, which have been taken up by their students. Additionally, in recent years, they have

---

<sup>3</sup> Survey of 2014/5 leavers

- provided funding for a new graduate from the BA and BSc programmes to take up a six-month graduate research internship.
88. The Panel noted that students were impressed by the employability opportunities offered by the Department. Undergraduate students spoke favourably about the placement opportunities open to them, and the support modules supporting them **[good practice m(i)]**.
89. The Panel noted that the wide range of optional modules available within programmes meant that students were not only able to tailor their programme to their interests, but also align them to subject and topics valued by employers. Indeed, the Department recognises the key role played by the student transcript in helping students to differentiate themselves in a crowded employment market **[good practice m(ii)]**.
90. Within the BA Economics students are afforded the opportunity to further develop their skills with Excel. The students felt that this opportunity, alongside other skills development activities (including report writing, data analysis, and use of software packages such as Stata, EVIEWS, Dynare and MATLAB) greatly enhanced their job prospects **[good practice m(iii)]**.
91. The Panel was particularly impressed by the Department's efforts to develop a focus on employability within the postgraduate curriculum. This was most evident in the MA in Public Policy where students could opt to take a Placement with Project option (where they undertake a short placement in an organisation and submit a related project) rather than a dissertation **[good practice m(iv)]**.
92. The Panel heard about the Department's pilot Capstone Project. The project is based on an American concept and aims to bridge the gap between academic and real-world experience (marrying the theoretical with the practical). It would see groups of students (with a mix of skills and backgrounds) undertake a paid project on behalf of a company. At the moment the activity is not credit bearing and the Department is considering whether this should change or whether it should remain as a co-curricular activity. The Panel found the Capstone Projects to be an innovative activity and were impressed by the breadth of possible projects, student response and demand from possibly partner companies **[good practice m(v)]**.
93. The Panel noted that the Department was not putting significant effort in recruiting its undergraduates on to its postgraduate offering. The Panel heard that the School mentions the possibility of taking a postgraduate degree at Reading during the Spring term of the third year. Students had told the Panel that they were keen to continue their studies at Reading, but that some of them were being told to continue their studies elsewhere. Whilst recognising the arguments for directing students to seek different views and practices, the Panel felt that the Department was missing a ready pool of possible applicants. The Panel advised the Department that it might be desirable to recruit from their own undergraduate, especially if they could resolve the issues indicated at paragraph 30 above.

## **Enhancement of quality and academic provision**

94. The Panel considered that the Department made appropriate and effective use of a range of datasets. The Panel felt that the Department responded appropriately to constructive feedback from the External Examiners, through adjusting course content, assessment and offering.
95. The Panel praised the Department's links and engagement with industry through placements and Capstone project. As well as providing the Department with settings for their students, the links also help to inform curriculum by providing insights into the needs and desires of businesses.
96. The Panel noted that the Department is fully engaged with the University's drive to have 80% of staff holding a teaching qualification. The recent influx of new staff means that many are going through, or have recently gone through the Academic Practice Programme (or PGCAP). The Department has one senior fellow of the HEA and is actively encouraging other key experienced members of staff to apply for this recognition via the FLAIR process. The Panel noted that the Departmental Director of Teaching and Learning's PGCAP project had won one of the portfolio prizes.

97. The Department has a Teaching & Learning Enhancement Group (TLEG) which meets on an ad hoc basis to discuss issues. The TLEG is made up of convened working groups looking at specific issues in teaching and learning. It provides an opportunity for the sharing of best practice and for the resolution of problems. Recent meetings/groups have looked at Part 1 tutorials, review of programmes and modules, and vertical economics. Membership of the groups is usually dictated by the topic being discussed, with a mix of both senior and more junior staff in attendance.
98. Whilst the Panel was encouraged by the Department's use of the TLEG and other activities (such as Peer review) for the dissemination of best practice, there was an overriding impression that the Department could benefit from a more structured approach to sharing best practice. As such, the Panel recommends that the Department explores ways to formalise the sharing of best practice in teaching and learning **[advisable recommendation f]**.
99. In speaking with some members of staff it appeared that there was a certain reticence around celebrating individual's success in teaching and learning. The Panel noted that the Department has much to celebrate, both on an individual and a collective basis. The Department should take steps to ensure that teaching and learning success is publically celebrated **[desirable recommendation i]**.
100. The Panel found that there was a lack of clarity amongst staff about the requirements for successfully completing the probationary period. Some staff were aware of some of the steps required, but there was a general sense of uncertainty around the exact steps that needed to be completed. It should be noted that new staff felt fully supported, but without a full sense of the objectives and targets they should aim for. The Panel feels that the School should put in place robust mechanisms in order to ensure that the University policies and procedures regarding the probationary requirements for staff are satisfied, and that staff are fully supported throughout the process **[necessary recommendation j]**.
101. The Panel noted that the University has a general induction for all staff and wondered if it might be helpful to have a specific induction for new academic staff. New members of staff indicated that such induction before they commenced teaching would have been useful. Of particular use would be practical information such as outlining what access to systems they have, where they can find key information (eg timetables, Blackboard sites), and who within the Department (and beyond) is responsible for various functions (including admin as well as teaching and learning). The new staff indicated that the School is in the process of developing a pack for staff, but the Panel felt that this could be usefully taken up on a University-wide basis as an activity supplemental to the Academic Practice Programme (APP) **[advisable recommendation l]**.

## **Main characteristics of the programmes under review**

102. The Department has an active and engaged body of staff who are delivering a well thought-out, coherent, and research-informed curriculum. The Department delivers a wide-range of programmes within the field of economics which reflects their inclusive view of the nature of the discipline and a heterodox departmental identity. The programmes offer students the chance to engage in a wide range of work-based learning opportunities, and both postgraduate and undergraduate level.
103. The Panel found that the staff are committed to a deep reflection upon teaching issues, and on the opportunities that have emerged within the institutional environment. The Department demonstrates a willingness to formulate medium-terms plans that provide the potential for wide-ranging, fundamental change in its offerings.
104. The Panel found that the Department was managing well under conflicting demands and external pressures. However, it should be noted that the ongoing demands on resources may eventually have a detrimental impact upon delivery and staff morale.

## **Conclusions on innovation and good practice**

105. The Panel identified the following as representing particularly good practice
- a. Staff are well-liked by students, and there is a reciprocal concern for the welfare of the students and staff are responsive to student concerns.
  - b. The development of new programmes with the ICMA centre and Politics shows an awareness of synergies and a willingness to exploit them
  - c. Work on restructuring the portfolio of programmes
  - d. The practical applications afforded by the BA Economics
  - e. The technical skills that are developed during the BSc programmes
  - f. Department engagement with NUIST activities and especially the Student Ambassadors initiative
  - g. Students were aware of, and impressed by, the research achievements of staff across a wide range of topics and approaches
  - h. The extra-curricular engagement, including the Conversations sessions
  - i. The tutorial system offers additional opportunities to deepen understanding and enhance learning
  - j. A large number of staff engaged in reflecting upon and developing teaching and learning
  - k. The Welcome Back sessions to support returning students
  - l. The Department's signposting of support, including ASK advisors, Maths Support and Study Support in the Library
  - m. Students were impressed by the employability opportunities offered by the department, including:
    - i. Placement opportunities and support modules for UGs
    - ii. Programmes offering a wide range of optional modules
    - iii. Skills development, including Excel, embedded within BA Economics
    - iv. The innovative delivery of placement within PGT
    - v. The Capstone project

## **Conclusions on quality and standards**

106. The Panel has concluded that the quality and standards of the programmes reviewed are appropriate.

## **Conclusions on new degree programme proposals**

107. The Panel received no submissions with regards to new programme proposals.

## **Recommendations**

108. The Panel recommends to the University Programmes Board that the following degree programmes taught by the Department of Economics are re-approved to run for a further six years:
- BA Economics
  - BA Economics with a Placement Year
  - BSc Economics
  - BSc Economics with a Placement Year
  - BSc Economics and Finance
  - BSc Business Economics
  - BSc Business Economics with a Placement Year
  - BSc Economics and Econometrics
  - BSc Economics and Econometrics with a Placement Year
  - MA in Public Policy

#### Report on the Periodic Review of Economics – Ellie Highwood & Richard Sandford

- MSc in Economics
- MSc in Business Economics
- MSc in Economics and Finance

109. The report will categorise any issues as follows, in order of priority:

- Those areas where the Review Team believes it is **necessary** for action to be taken urgently to safeguard the standard of provision;
- Those areas where it is **advisable** that the issues be addressed as soon as possible.
- Those areas where it is **desirable** that the issue be addressed over a longer time span.

110. The Panel has made the following recommendations which must be addressed as a condition of re-approval:

#### The Panel makes the following recommendations to the Department:

##### Necessary

There were no necessary recommendations.

##### Advisable

- Explore ways to establish distinctive identities for each of the Undergraduate programmes.
- Further develop and formalise the strategy for the management and further development of the MSc offering. This will include:
  - Understanding the purposes and aim of the MSc Economics programme;
  - Ensure that the delivered MSc programmes meet the stated aims; and
  - Work with Marketing, Communications and Engagement to further explore and develop the market for the programmes.
- Continue to review assessment procedures within the Department to ensure clear and consistent approaches for:
  - Assessment briefs and marking criteria; and,
  - The delivery and quality of feedback.
- Create transparency in the formulation and application of the workload model.
- Ensure that the responsibility for the leadership of team teaching is clear to students and staff.
- Formalise the sharing of best practice in teaching and learning.

##### Desirable

- Use T&L networks to investigate ways to improve engagement of, and delivery to large cohorts.
- Consider succession planning for key teaching and learning roles.
- Ensure that teaching and learning success is publically celebrated.

#### The Panel also makes the following recommendation to the School:

##### Necessary

- Put in place robust mechanisms in order to ensure that the School satisfies the University policies and procedures regarding the probationary requirements for staff, and further, supports staff throughout the process.

**The Panel also makes the following recommendations to the University:**

**Advisable**

- k. Explore the provision of appropriate teaching and learning resources, including
    - i. Training for Excel;
    - ii. A/V facilities in large lecture rooms;
    - iii. Offsite licenses for software; and,
    - iv. Provision of dedicated study spaces for PGT students.
  - l. Investigate the development of an induction pack/activities for new members of academic staff.
111. The Panel does not have a recommendation to the University Programmes Board as to whether any proposals for new degree programmes should be approved, as this is not applicable.