UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

Academic Standards Committee - Friday 29 May 2009

Responses to the Recommendations Arising from the Review of the Department of History held on 20 February 2008

Ms Helen Clegg, Clerk to the Review Panel

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The Review Panel commends the Department on its awareness of its strengths and weaknesses, which was evident both in the Self Evaluation Report and in discussions during the Review. Despite the number of recommendations, the Panel has no concerns regarding the quality of the Department, its provision or its operation. The Panel was impressed with the clear commitment of Departmental staff (both teaching and support), and found the students with whom it had met to be a credit to the Department.

Recommendations

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department of History. It is important to note that many of these recommendations refer to issues identified by the Department for action, either in the Self Evaluation Report or through discussion at the Review.

The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs to which they refer in the text of the report. They are grouped by the areas for improvement/enhancement noted above, and are ranked in order of priority.

Support for Graduate Teaching Assistants

Recommendation 1:

The Panel **recommends** that the issue of GTA rates of pay be referred to the Dean of Faculty for investigation with Human Resources, with a view to arriving at a more appropriate rate which reflects the amount and quality of work being done by GTAs. *[Paragraph 4.8.1]*

For the attention of: **The Dean of Faculty/Human Resources**

Response: Dean

The Panel will be aware that the issue of GTA pay, and therefore their contribution to frequency of undergraduate seminars, is a matter of ongoing discussion centrally via HR and other agencies. We recognise that the contribution of GTAs to student retention and confidence is vital, and are attempting to budget for a feasible level of employment for them. Faculty and the Department will undertake an appropriate level of training, as before.

Response: HR

HR is currently undertaking a review of the use of GTAs, tutors, demonstrators etc, and the actual duties they undertake. It is the intention to link their duties to the existing level descriptors for the Research & Teaching Family, probably somewhat

below level 7. The data from all the faculties is currently being collated, and it is intended to have a first meeting at the end of April 2009. Once the level has been determined, a pay band can be assessed, and the employment contractual situation addressed.

Recommendation 2:

The Panel **recommends** that the Faculty must ensure all GTAs carrying out marking be appropriately trained, prior to approval as additional internal examiners by Senate. A detailed understanding of the operation of the Code of Assessment was of key importance and this should be emphasised by Heads of Department. *[Paragraph 4.8.4]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department/Dean of Faculty**

Response: Department

The Department accepts this recommendation and confirms that we require all GTAs carrying out marking and nominated as additional internal examiners to attend a training session run by Dr Thomas Munck for the Faculty of Arts. The one-hour session covers the following topics:

a) why we have a single Code, and why it is mandatory for all assessment;
b) the main features of the Code, including Schedule A;
c) how one should go about grading particular assignments, calibrating ILOs onto both the generic primary grade descriptors in the Code and any glosses added by Departments for the particular level at which the assignment is set, and using the secondary bands to refine the primary verdict;
d) how GTAs should be mentored, how they should themselves double-check with mentors where doubts arise, and how they might learn from double marking and External monitoring; and
e) how their component marks would then normally be used by their course convener to calculate final grades.

GTAs are encouraged to seek further advice if they have any concerns.

Response: Dean

See response to Recommendation 1 above.

Recommendation 3:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department invite all Graduate Teaching Assistants, as a matter of course, to observe at least one seminar led by their assigned mentor, as part of their personal and skills development. *[Paragraph 4.8.3]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department accepts this recommendation, after discussion between the QA Officer and the conveners of Level 1 and 2 courses about how best to implement it in view of the number of GTAs and timetabling. Level 1 and 2 courses are scheduled so that GTAs and their mentors normally are teaching at the same time, which can make observation of mentors by GTAs, or vice versa, difficult. In response, second semester courses have implemented a system by which each new GTA has attended a seminar offered by one of the

staff tutors contributing to the course. Where timetabling clashes have made this difficult, staff have been given the option of inviting a student to attend a seminar for an Honours course. Priority has been given to new GTAs, due to the large number (c.35) of GTAs within the Department, but some continuing GTAs also participated. It is proposed to have a rolling programme, whereby each newly appointed GTA attends one staff seminar.

Provision of Seminars at Undergraduate Level

Recommendation 4:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department give serious consideration to the introduction of additional seminars at undergraduate level, even if a regular weekly seminar was not possible, in order to enhance the student learning experience and allow for the possibility of additional assessed work. High priority should be given to this in terms of resourcing and the issue should be referred to the Dean of Faculty with a view to increasing the GTA teaching budget whilst at least retaining, and ideally increasing, the number of GTAs. *[Paragraph 4.7.1]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department/The Dean of Faculty**

Response: Department

The Department has given this recommendation serious consideration. Level 1 conveners met in June 2008 to discuss whether a move to more frequent meetings would be an appropriate response to the new academic year. However, the Department decided to stick with six seminars, both to leave time for essay tutorials, and due to insufficient resources. The increase in GTA pay (in response to Recommendation 1) increased the annual cost of GTA from c. £30k to c. £35k, which is more than twice the GTA budget we receive from the Faculty. We estimate that an increase in the number of seminars in just one large Level 1 course would cost £600 per seminar, i.e. £2,400 to move from 6 to 10 seminars per semester in a single course.

The reduced length of the semester to eleven weeks has required some adjustments to the pattern of fortnightly seminars (which cannot start before week 2 to allow students time to join the course). In the current session, Level 1B and 1C conveners opted for a pattern of weekly seminars for a substantial section of the course, using the remaining weeks for essay tutorials. For example, in 1B students had weekly meetings in weeks 2-6, with a sixth held later in the term; weeks 7-10 were used for pre- and post- essay tutorials and essay completion. This meant that students met with their tutor, either as part of a group or individually, almost every week. Level 1A maintained fortnightly seminars in 2008/9, but has now decided to adopt the pattern of a block of five weekly meetings in 2009/10, bringing it in line with the other Level 1 courses.

Response: Dean

See response to Recommendation 1 above.

Assessment and Feedback

Recommendation 5:

The Panel **recommends** that, with regard to the return of work and the provision of feedback, the Department and any outside agencies ensure that

the standards set out in the Code of Best Practice are adhered to, for all students at all levels. *[Paragraph 4.3.5]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department has maintained its policy of requiring return of undergraduate coursework within two weeks, at the latest, with good success. This was particularly important for Level 1 and 2 courses at the end of the first semester, when course conveners made sure that all essays and seminar papers were returned by the last day of the semester, so that students received them in time to prepare for examinations, which they sat before Christmas for the first time.

In postgraduate programmes, new standards and procedures for essay return have been instituted for the MLitt in History and the MLitt in War Studies for the 2008-09 session, having first been trialled by the MLitt in War Studies. We identified double-marking as a significant source of delay in return of feedback. Members of the Department and outside agencies have been asked to ensure that First Examiners' marks and comments are returned to the student within two weeks of submitting coursework. The second examiner's mark and comments along with the internally agreed mark should then follow within a further two weeks. Work is now returned to students via the postgraduate administrator which enables easier monitoring of marks and the timely return of coursework.

Recommendation 6:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department consider the use of formative essays earlier in the semester, in order to allow feedback to be used more effectively and to help students engage more with the subject. Alternatively, the Department might employ a different format to the usual essays, in order to accommodate this additional formative assessment within existing resources. *[Paragraph 4.3.4]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department has considered how best to respond to this recommendation, in view of its implications for staff workloads and GTA costs, since the Department does not have the resources to cover the cost of additional marking. In the first instance, we have introduced to the Level 1 courses the requirement that students prepare a compulsory one-page essay plan, which provides a draft statement of the argument, paragraph outline, and short bibliography. Although this is not itself assessed, it provides the basis for discussion at the pre-essay tutorial, when the student receives formative feedback. This trial is being evaluated at the end of this session, and this will provide the basis of the Department's decision about whether to continue, extend or modify the scheme.

Recommendation 7:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department consider broadening the range of assessment methods used, in order to enhance achievement of Intended Learning Outcomes and thereby somewhat reduce the emphasis on formal examinations.

[Paragraph 4.2.2]

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department established a working party to consider this recommendation, and this is proposing two significant changes to the current pattern of Honours assessment which will broaden the range of assessment methods and reduce the emphasis on formal examinations: (1) Adjustment of the balance between examinations and assessed coursework from 70:30 to 60:40, giving greater weight to seminar papers and participation, in order to improve student learning and employability. Students have themselves been requesting this change (most recently at the Staff-Student Committee meeting held in March 2009), to reflect the time they put into preparation. (2) Provision for alternative forms of research-based and reflective writing to the essay, including journals and book reviews. These changes will be accompanied by explicit statement of assessment criteria for presentations and seminar participation. These proposals will be laid for approval, first before Teaching Committee, and then before the Department, in May 2009 before being presented to the Faculty's Undergraduate Board of Studies for approval in the 2009/10 session.

Teaching and Learning Resources

Recommendation 8:

The Panel **recommends** that Estates and Buildings be alerted to the poor condition of DISH Laboratory A, with a view to carrying out the necessary refurbishment as had already been recommended in the 2001 review of the Department. *[Paragraph 4.8.7]*

For the attention of: **The Director of Estates and Buildings**

Response:

Project Services happy to receive instructions from the Dean to undertake refurb works. EBO suggests the works could be funded by the Faculty through minor works budget. Alternatively, if the value exceeds £100k E&B are happy to assist the Faculty with a Capex Application.

Recommendation 9:

The Panel **recommends** that the issue of disabled access to the Department must be pursued as far as practicable, with access at least to certain parts of the Department being made possible. *[Paragraph 4.8.8]*

For the attention of: **The Director of Estates and Buildings**

Response:

EBO (Maintenance Services) will investigate the practicalities of the provision of disabled access/egress within these areas and within budgetary constraints. It should be noted that the listed nature of the buildings impose further limitations on the possibilities for providing such facilities.

Recommendation 10:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department carry out an inventory of the required texts and determine the cost of acquiring sufficient copies. The matter could then be raised formally with the Library Committee with a view to holding

additional copies and thus reducing the reliance on short loan periods for core texts. *[Paragraph 4.8.10]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department has obtained from the Library circulation statistics for books placed on Short Loan for use in Level 1 and Level 2 courses. These confirm that some titles are heavily used, although many books placed on Short Loan are taken out by few or no students. Where the statistics show that particular titles are in heavy demand (more than 10 uses per copy), the Library automatically purchases additional copies. For example, based on usage in History 1A in 2007/8, the Library subsequently purchased a total of 29 copies of 19 different titles. When available, e-books may also be purchased, permitting use by an unlimited number of students. Since essay titles vary from year to year, book use also varies, and some previously popular texts were less heavily used in 2008/9. The Library system of automatic purchase is working well, but we will keep it under review, and if necessary discuss with the Library whether book purchase should be triggered by a lower level of use. The Library's digitisation service has also been helpful in making key chapters and articles available for seminars.

Recommendation 11:

The Panel **recommends** that students, particularly at Honours level, be provided with training on the use of periodicals in order to further enhance their learning experience. [Paragraph 4.8.11]

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department believes that periodical use is important to the study of History at all levels, and indeed the External Examiner for History 1A has recommended that we encourage students to make more use of journal articles in the first year. With this recommendation in mind, we have provided training in use of periodicals to first year students, either by setting required reading from journals or by encouraging inclusion of an article in the bibliography of their essay plan. History 1C includes a seminar in which students compare the arguments of two contrasting articles, and the other Level 1 courses are considering adoption of a similar seminar. After the success of the Honours induction course in 2008/9, we will also introduce training in periodicals to the induction course from 2009/10.

Recommendation 12:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department encourage fuller use of Moodle as a teaching tool and as a learning community for students, which would allow additional support for learning. [Paragraph 6.4]

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The use of Moodle within the Department continues to expand. This year 35 Honours courses provided resources on Moodle, including lecture notes, essay lists, reading, links to electronic journals and books held by the Library, and links to films, interviews, sources and other online resources. Moodle continues to be important in pre-Honours courses, and History 2Sco received

especially positive feedback for increasing the availability of online sources via the Moodle. History 2Sco was one of four Level 1 and 2 courses that allowed students to sign up for seminar groups via Moodle, increasing student choice, with positive results, and this practice will be extended to other courses. The Department does not use online assessment tools (e.g. through multiple choice tests), which are not appropriate to assessment in History. Only limited use has been made so far of online discussion forums. In our experience students are reluctant to use these unless they are set a specific task. However, in one Honours course students used a group forum to organise project meetings, and we hope to build on this practice. We have also discussed with Deneka MacDonald of LTS how to make greater use of Moodle and Mahara to establish learning communities, and for learning diaries, blogs and student 'Facebook'-style groups. This is a developing area, as more facilities are added to Moodle and Mahara in summer 2009.

Postgraduate Range of Provision

Recommendation 13:

> The Panel **recommends** that the Department discuss the sustainability of providing a large number of programmes with very small student numbers, and consider whether offering a smaller number of programmes with specialisations, which utilised common core teaching, might be a more appropriate course of action, or whether there is an alternative solution. *[Paragraph 4.5.2]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

> The History Department currently offers two MLitt programmes on its own, the MLitt in History and the MLitt in War Studies, and makes a significant contribution to several others, including the MLitts in American Studies, Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Medieval Scottish Studies, and Scottish Studies, which are currently administered by other departments. The MLitts in History and War Studies have recruited healthy numbers in recent years; in 2007/08 the MLitt in History recruited 16 students and the MLitt in War Studies recruited 14. In all of the programmes to which the Department contributes, including those attracting smaller numbers, we believe that the benefits of collaboration and development of research students are of considerable importance, especially when students in other departments are considered. For example, the interdisciplinary MLitt in Medieval Scottish Studies programme has won AHRC funding for nine of its students over the past seven years, across the Departments of Archaeology, Celtic and History.

> Furthermore, by contributing many of our taught options to a range of interdisciplinary programmes both within and beyond the Faculty of Arts, tutors are often able to increase the numbers of students taking each option to ensure that options are not taught to very small groups. This allows the Department to offer a wide range of taught options, keeping our degree programmes attractive to potential applicants, without sacrificing efficiency to unsustainable levels. A review of postgraduate taught programmes in the Department undertaken in the 2008/09 session has established guidelines recommending that postgraduate options should normally only be offered to groups of 4 or more students, with an upper cap of 12-15 to maintain the student-centred seminar style of teaching.

Feedback from Postgraduate Students

Recommendation 14:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department ensures that formal feedback procedures are in place for students on all postgraduate programmes, even where student numbers are very small, in order to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to offer feedback on their experiences. The Panel further **recommends** that GTA representatives be included in the membership of the Staff-Student Liaison Committee. *[Paragraph 6.2]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The feedback procedures for the MLitt in History and the MLitt in War Studies have been co-ordinated so that students in both programmes are requested to complete questionnaires at the end of the taught component of each programme and on submitting the dissertation. Additional feedback is solicited in relation to the core course for each programme. Students from both programmes are represented on the Staff-Student Liaison Committee which meets biannually. (As noted above, the other programmes are currently being administered by other departments.)

After consultation with GTAs, we have also invited GTAs to elect a representative to attend the undergraduate Staff-Student Committee and Teaching Committee meetings, and we continue to encourage course conveners to involve GTAs fully in pre- and post-course organisational meetings, so that GTAs have an opportunity to provide feedback.

Transferable Skills

Recommendation 15:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department makes more explicit the fact that the development of transferable skills is catered for in a variety of ways throughout the curriculum, in order that students are aware of the relevance of these. *[Paragraph 4.4.4]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

The Department has responded to the recommendation to be more explicit in the development of transferable skills in the following ways:

- At Level 1, training was incorporated into the seminars in 2008/9 to provide specific instruction in key skills, focusing on the avoidance of plagiarism, note-taking, essay writing, referencing and bibliography. The purpose of the training is improve essay writing and reduce plagiarism, highlighting areas where expectations may differ from what students learned in school, and to create a foundation of basic skills in History writing on which Level 2 and Honours courses can build. GTAs use worksheets to introduce students to such topics as how to use evidence from their reading in essays, and may divide students into groups to facilitate discussion. Level 1 conveners are currently discussing other possible topics for seminars, including training in critiquing articles and doing research for essays.

- The new History Honours induction course ran for the first time in September 2008, introducing an unusually large Junior Honours class of 175 students to advanced study of History. The course included the viewing of a film on interpretation in history ('The History Boys'); a panel discussion between members of the Department on the nature of the history; seminar discussions on the nature of historical evidence and on preparing seminar presentations, which will be an important assessed skill throughout Honours; and a plenary session on the skills students will develop, including distribution of forms for Personal Development Planning. A recent graduate working in the Kelvingrove Museum also gave a talk about the relevance of an Honours degree to employment. Based upon the success of the induction course, it will be expanded in future years, including more emphasis on skills development and the value of these skills for employment.

- The Honours dissertation training course (in February 2009) focused on a range of skills in research, analysis, written expression, and overall project management, stressing the utility of these skills beyond the academic realm. Building on the PDP materials distributed in the Induction course, the dissertation training incorporated a more specialised PDP element, which encouraged students to chart their progress in these key skills over the coming year until they submit their dissertations in 2010. This is intended to make students more aware of the skills they will develop through different phases of the project, including honing the topic and identifying source material; research and analysis of sources; interpretation of evidence and the crafting of an argument; organization of evidence, and writing and referencing. Students are encouraged to see the coordination of these discrete tasks as important lessons in time management, the use of human resources, and personal motivation.

- With funding from the Arts Faculty, under the heading of PDP and Employability, Dr Karin Bowie introduced a workshop to develop transferable skills in oral presentation to her Honours course, Scottish Popular Culture, initially in 2007/8, and with modifications in 2008/9. The project confirmed the benefits of being more explicit about transferable skills. Student evaluation was overwhelmingly positive, as students felt more confident and came to realise the difference between oral presentations and written seminar papers. Dr Bowie presented a summary of the results at a Departmental meeting in February 2009. Learning from this trial will inform a training session for the 2009-10 Junior Honours Induction programme. It also has been considered by the assessment working party in the development of more explicit requirements for the demonstration of oral skills in seminars.

Plagiarism

Recommendation 16:

The Panel **recommends** that the Department give consideration to a move towards electronic submission of coursework and consequently to the use of the available software, Turnitin, although this is still at a pilot stage within the university. The Panel further **recommends** that the Department reinforces clear guidance provided to students at all levels as to what constitutes plagiarism and the acceptable use of sources. *[Paragraph 5.2]*

For the attention of: **The Head of Department**

Response:

In the 2008/9 the Department conducted a trial of the Turnitin software by using it in two Honours 20-credit courses and one Honours special subject. The trial was deliberately kept small, in view of delays in rolling out the software across the University, and the need for tutors to receive training. We decided to acquire experience with small courses, before attempting to use Turnitin in our large pre-Honours courses, not least due to the guidance we received that all students taking a course should be treated in the same way.

Students were permitted to submit both a preliminary draft and a final draft to Turnitin and to see the report, in accordance with University policy. There was initially some anxiety among students about the requirement, although this was reduced by the experience. In total, c. 60 student essays were submitted electronically to Turnitin. These revealed no problems of plagiarism, whether from other student essays, articles or online resources. As Heather Worlledge-Andrew had advised, the similarity score assigned to each essay could not be relied upon, and it was necessary to check each essay separately. There was a considerable degree of 'noise' in the reports, resulting from the fact that the question title and common references in footnotes were often identified as potential instances of plagiarism. Quotations used by more than one student might also be identified.

The most serious drawback of Turnitin, however, is that its database does not include books, although these are the most commonly used sources in the writing of History essays. In theory, the database includes books indexed for Google Books, but we found few examples of these in plagiarism reports. Books are sometimes detected indirectly because two students have quoted from the same one. It is our experience, from cases detected manually, that History students most often plagiarise from books, raising doubts about the suitability of Turnitin, with its current database, for detecting plagiarism in essays in History (and perhaps other humanities subjects). The Department will consider whether further trials would be appropriate to detect plagiarism of web-based resources in Level 1 courses, with students who are new to University, and in Honours dissertations, since institutions such as the University of Leeds publish student dissertations online.

Discussion with Honours students suggests that some may have adopted a tactical approach to using Turnitin, whereby they sought to learn how to adjust essays to reduce the chances of being detected. For this reason, we believe that Turnitin should not be introduced to every History course, and would urge the University not to require its use in all courses. Over the past year we have detected only a few cases of plagiarism, all by other means such as searching for keywords in Google Books. From these cases, we believe that plagiarism often arises from confusion about note taking and referencing. For this reason, our Level 1 training includes a section on plagiarism, which is intended to define plagiarism and to reduce its occurrence by teaching good note-taking methods. The Department's style guide, Honours handbook and pre-Honours course handbooks include clear statements of what constitutes plagiarism and advice on proper use of sources.