ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL UNIT 16G6: FdSc COMPUTING (SWC)

19 October 2018

PANEL:

Professor David Hassan, Associate Dean (Global Engagement), Faculty of Life and Health Sciences, Ulster University (Chair)
Dr Peter Nicholl, Senior Lecturer, School of Computing, Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, Ulster University
Mrs Hazel Bruce, Lecturer in Textile Art, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University
Dr Georgios (George) Leontidis, Senior Lecturer in Computer Science, School of Computer Science, Lincoln University
Ms Mekala (Meg) Soosay, Senior Lecturer, School of Computing Creative Technologies and Engineering, Leeds Beckett University
Ms Martyna Pirowska, student representative, South West College

REVALIDATION UNIT CO-ORDINATOR:

Ms Sinead Mcgee, Deputy Head of Department, South West College

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs A Guarino, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University
Mrs Maeve Paris, Faculty Partnership Manager, Ulster University

1   INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The Panel was convened to consider the following provision:

- FdSc Computing (Dungannon [FT/PT] / Enniskillen [FT/PT] / Omagh [FT])

The proposed course is a level 5 award comprising six compulsory level 4 modules (20 credit points each), five level 5 modules, two of which are optional from a choice of four (20 credit points each) and a compulsory 40 credit point work-based learning module. It would be offered in full-time mode over two academic years in Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh and in part-time mode over three academic years in Dungannon and Enniskillen only. A CertHE exit award would be available for those exiting after successfully completing the six level 4 modules.

Graduates of the programme would be eligible to be considered to progress to the following Ulster University courses:
- *Bsc Hons Computing Science (Full-time: Jordanstown)*
- *BEng Hons Software Engineering (Full-time: Jordanstown)*
- *BSc Hons Computing Systems (Part-time: Jordanstown)*

2   DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting;
- Guidelines for Revalidation Panels;
- QAA subject benchmark statement for Computing, February 2016;
- QAA Characteristics Statement, Foundation Degree, September 2015;
- Statement from the Faculty Partnership Manager;
- Preliminary comments from panel members; and
- Course submission.

Prior to the meeting, the Panel was taken on a tour of the facilities available to support delivery of the provision by Ms Sinead Mcgee, Revalidation Unit Coordinator. The Panel found the tour to be beneficial and informative and were impressed by the facilities and the vibrant campus environment.

3   MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

3.1   Work-Based Learning

The Panel asked the senior team to outline the structure of the work-based learning module. The senior team explained that students were provided support from the initial stages of preparation for placement as well as assistance in securing placement. During the placement, students complete a weekly log which function as the base of their final reports. The industrial mentors, using pro formas provided by the College, graded the students over time evaluating engagement and increased competencies such as time management. College tutors conducted site visits meeting both the employers and the students.

The Panel were concerned about the variability potential of employers' contribution to the final mark explaining that for this reason the element of employer assessment has been removed from the final mark at Ulster University. The Panel suggested, in order to ensure consistency of marking, the senior team consider removing the 10% mark and only seek advice and feedback from employers.

3.2   Projected Intake

The Panel asked for clarification on the proposed student intake referring to the projected intake table provided in the document. The senior team noted that that 15 students would be the minimum viable cohort size to ensure a quality student experience and for the ability to execute productive group work. They further noted that the maximum student numbers were to be dictated by the level of resources available for the provision. As there were 24 personal computers available in some of the classrooms, this would dictate the upper limit for the full-time and part-time provision combined. As the number of computers differ on each campus, it was agreed with the senior team, for the sake of uniformity, a minimum enrolment of 15 and a maximum of 24 students per class, with one cohort of maximum 24 students in each Enniskillen and Omagh, and two classes with a maximum cohort of 48 in Dungannon.

3.3   Optional Modules

Due to the small cohort size at the Omagh and Enniskillen campuses, the senior team agreed that optional modules would only be offered at Dungannon campus, and that the Omagh and Enniskillen provision would be fully compulsory. Accordingly, the course team agreed, for each semester, to pick one of the optional modules offered in Dungannon to be delivered as compulsory at both Omagh and Enniskillen. The Faculty Partnership Manager highlighted that in subsequent years the team would be able to change the optional modules chosen by submitting a CA3 form.

The Panel expressed concern that the marketing provision may be misleading as not all optional modules would be offered on all the three campuses. The senior team noted the importance of complete accuracy in advertisement under the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) regulations, and agreed that the programme structure on each campus be clearly presented in the course document and that all promotional material would reflect this revised structure.

3.4   Staff Development

The Panel was advised of the College's comprehensive staff development policy which allowed staff to engage in relevant staff development activities, which in turn enhanced the student experience and the quality of teaching and learning.

The senior team described the comprehensive and varied staff development opportunities on offer, listing specific examples such as: Staff Development programmes within the College; Ulster University Staff Development Events; Funding for Study Master's degrees; Python training to all staff; and Staff undertaking HEA accreditation.

3.5   Industry-Informed Curriculum

The Panel asked the senior team to outline the extent and nature of stakeholder engagement in the development and design of the programme. The senior team confirmed the curriculum had been informed, developed and refined based on industry needs and feedback from key stakeholders. Various examples were provided of the comprehensive research conducted by the team to ensure industrial needs were met. These included, for example, the consultation with the Industrial Advisory Board (IAB) for computing; the Training Needs Analysis carried out with all work based learning providers; employers input which was discussed in the annual course review process; the research of up-to-date graduate skills on various websites such as nijobfinder; and the close links with graduates of the provision who provided valuable insight through their personal experience.

3.6   Transition to Higher Education

The Panel was impressed by the high level of pastoral care evident at the College. However, the Panel expressed concern regarding the transition to Higher Education, querying how the students were being prepared for integration with a significantly larger cohort. The senior team assured the Panel that there were robust mechanisms in place to assist with this transition, starting from the first year of studies. The senior team explained that study skills were embedded from an early stage, and that they were delivered in a scaffolding manner in which level 4 modules covering core skills were delivered during the first year. These were then built upon with the more advanced level 5 modules in second

year, all in preparation for level 6 modules and while taking cognisance of the mapping to progression routes to Ulster University.

The senior team were of the view that this structure allowed for gradual enhancement of students' confidence and independence. Encouragement of independent study supported by VLE was also mentioned.

The Panel suggested the senior team considered a similar arrangement to the existing one with Ulster University's School of Engineering in which College students have the opportunities to come to the Magee campus and integrate with Ulster students. The School found this experience to be extremely beneficial to the students, allowing for a smoother transition into University. The senior team was keen to explore similar joint projects for their second-year students.

4   MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a group of eight students from different year groups across a range of the provision from all three campuses.

The Chair welcomed the students noting that they are an important part of the quality assurance process, helping in assessing the quality of their experiences and to identify areas where improvement can be made.

4.1   Best Aspects of the Programme

The Panel began by asking the students for an overview of their experience and what they considered to be the best aspects of the course. The student group was mostly complimentary of the provision, specifically mentioning:

- The course was enjoyable, especially its practical aspects;
- Easy progression from an Access course to the Foundation degree;
- Part-time mode was accommodating for parents and working students; and
- Good range of modules which helped inform future career decisions.

4.2   Student Support

The students praised the high level of support and pastoral care they received from staff who, in their view, made every effort to always be available during and after class, in addition to providing further academic support via such avenues as PowerPoint presentations and online tutorials. The students felt valuable support was also provided by the HE Officers who offered workshops on various academic skills.

4.3   Progression to University

The students had a clear understanding of the various progression routes to higher education, detailing the different entry criteria for Ulster University and Queens University. The students explained that this knowledge was clearly articulated from the very beginning of their studies and that they felt the provision adequately helped them prepare for academic progression. The support was exemplified by the weekly tutorial offered by the staff.

4.4   Assessment

The Panel asked the students about the methods of assessment used and the assessment workload they experienced. The students explained that while assessment load varied throughout the semester, the weekly labs did prove stressful. The students agreed that the assessment load was heavy and unevenly spaced, giving the example of week 7 in second year in which the bunching of assessment was a cause for stress.

4.5   Assessment of Group work

The students reported no issues relating to group work, explaining that they felt working with others was extremely beneficial and that the marks they received accurately reflected each individual's contribution to the work. The students described the composition of the groups as informal and ad-hoc. The Panel expressed concern stating that further thought would need to be given to the marking strategy of group work as well as the composition of the groups.

4.6   Course Structure

The students found that the delivery of the two long thin modules, Computing Mathematics and Computer Technologies, and the assessment methods used were beneficial, explaining that they felt well prepared for the final exams.

4.7   Student Representation

The Panel asked if the students were given an opportunity to raise any issues they had with the programme or other related matters, and if these were addressed. The Panel noted that the students welcomed the opportunity of having student representation they could approach and advised the Panel that any issues identified filtered through to the course team and have been promptly addressed.

4.8   Plans for after Graduation

Mixed responses were given to the panel about aspirations after graduation, with most agreeing that studying at Ulster University would be their preferred next step on their journey, either at Magee or Jordanstown campus. Some specified their preference for a part-time degree to enable them to work in industry with mixed responses about commuting or relocating to either Magee or Jordanstown if they did decide to continue with their studies.

4.9   Suggestions for Change

The Panel asked the students what they would like to change in the programme in order to enhance their experience. The students only advised that they would benefit from more quiet study areas in the library which they often found to be very noisy.

The Panel thanked the students for their engagement and wished them well in their studies and future career.

5   MEETING WITH THE COURSE TEAM

5.1   Virtual Learning Environment

At the request of the Panel a short presentation was provided on the College's Virtual Learning Environment detailing how Blackboard would be used to support the programme and its learning process. Following the presentation, the provision was discussed in detail with members of the course team representing all three campuses.

In response to the Panel, the team explained module requirements and learning outcomes were accessible on blackboard, in addition to the Student Handbook. Additional indications for students to achieve higher marks were provided, including clear marking scale and marking descriptors, which are externally verified.

5.2   Assessment

The Panel asked the team to describe their assessment strategy, reporting the students felt the assessment load was heavy and unevenly spaced and that the bunching of assessment around week 7 was especially stressful.

The team described their assessment strategy, giving the example of the Computing Mathematics module. They explained that math skills were taught over the two semesters to allow for consolidation of the content. The topics covered were grouped and assessed every 4-5 weeks with gradual rising levels of difficulty. The team felt that this scaffolding assessment structure reinforced previous learning as well as enhanced students' skills and confidence. The Panel noted that the bunching of assessment might seem heavier than it was in practice as some of assessment items presented in the Exemplar Assessment Table were submission dates for long standing projects or items representing group work.

To alleviate the stress reported by the students the Panel encouraged the team to consider embedding more forms of formative assessment into the provision as a way of building students' confidence and preparing them for the summative ones.

5.3   Work-Based Learning

The Panel was of the view that the programme learning outcomes for the Work-Based Learning module were not chosen selectively. The team agreed to reduce the number of programme learning outcomes following a review which would be conducted with students who have completed the module.

In response to the Panel's concern regarding the variability potential of employers' contribution to the final mark, the team elaborated on the process described by the senior team (refer 3.1). The team explained that there were robust mechanisms in place to ensure consistency of marking. Industrial mentors were given pro formas for the marking alongside clear guidance on how they should be completed. Further guidance was provided during the three meetings which were conducted with all industrial mentors. In preparation for these visits, the lecturers would review the students' weekly work-based logs, examining progress and addressing any issues that may have been flagged. Furthermore, each student would complete a learning contract with their employers, which further ensured clarity of responsibilities and expectations.

The team advised the Panel that this process has also been moderated by the provision's external examiner. The Panel noted that the work-based learning research project, which has proven very beneficial to the students, was recently introduced following the external examiner's recommendation.

The Panel reiterated their suggestion to remove the industrial mentor assessment from the final mark and only seek advice and feedback from employers, in order to ensure consistency of marking.

5.4   Course Structure

The Panel expressed concern regarding the internal coherence of the part-time structure, as level 5 modules would have been taught before the level 4 ones were completed. The Panel explained that this would not only be inconsistent with the full-time structure but would also undermine the academic coherence of the provision and pose a complication for the CertHE exit award. The course team assured the Panel that the structure of the part-time mode be revised to ensure that all level 4 modules would be completed prior to delivery of the level 5 modules.

5.5   Internationalisation

The Panel queried if the students were presented with international opportunities. The team explained that provision offered various opportunities for student mobility. These included international placement opportunities and mentioning. By way of example, the team mentioned three students who were at that time undertaking placement in Spain. The team also described study links with China, offering many of their students the opportunity to travel there over the summer. The team added that they were also looking at the potential of expanding the online learning facility for international students from China, Russia, Dubai, Canada and the USA.

5.6   Student Feedback

The Panel asked about the mechanisms for addressing student feedback. The team assured the Panel that students were being heard and any negative feedback received was considered and promptly addressed. The team explained that they worked closely with the students to ensure satisfactory solutions were achieved.

5.7   Transition to Higher Education

The Panel sought further clarification in regard to the facilitation of transition into Higher Education. The team elaborated on the mechanisms described by the senior team (refer 3.6) assuring the Panel that students were made aware of the need to develop their skills and independence as they progressed through the programme and into University. Students were also encouraged to avail of the help of the HE advisors who provided an over-arching tailored service designed to prepare the students according to their needs. The team added that support was provided to staff in developing new learning and teaching strategies which would help prepare students for lifelong learning as well as enhance their confidence. The team assured the Panel that, over their two years of studies, they saw clear evidence of students maturing and growing in confidence.

6   CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the team on the following aspects evident from the validation:

- the strong industry relationship and collaboration with the Computing Industry Advisory Board, ensuring the design of the curriculum is aligned with real industry/business needs;
- the high level of staff dedication and excellent pastoral care, exemplified by staff regularly being available to students beyond teaching hours; and
- the resources and academic support available to students, demonstrated by the option of attending lectures on two separate occasions, to accommodate the diversity in the student cohort's academic background.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programme be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2019/20 to 2023/24 inclusive) subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by 19 January 2019 for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Conditions

i)   that matters of detail and clarification as identified in the notes by Academic Office to the Panel are addressed;

ii)   that the cohort sizes be revised in the final document to reflect the Faculty recommendations of a minimum enrolment of 15 and a maximum of 24 students per class, with one cohort of maximum 24 students in each Enniskillen and Omagh and two classes with a maximum cohort of 48 in Dungannon;

iii) that the structure of the part-time mode be revised in the final document to ensure that all level 4 modules are completed prior to delivery of the level 5 modules; and

iv)   that the programme structure on each campus be clearly presented in the course document and in promotion of the course to reflect that optional modules would only be offered at Dungannon campus, and that the Omagh and Enniskillen provision would be fully compulsory.

Recommendations

i)   that consideration be given to a reduction of the number of assessment components in the portfolio element of the Work-Based Learning module and that the number of programme learning outcomes for the Work-Based Learning module be reviewed in the Learning Outcome map; and

ii)   that the Exemplar Assessment map be reviewed to ensure students are not asked to complete more than two assessment items at any given week.

7   APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members and, in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the validation process.

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