

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL MEETING FOR SUBJECT UNIT 12A: ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

5 November 2019

PANEL:	Dr T Maguire, Head of School of Arts and Humanities, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Ulster University (Chair) Professor K Hiscock, Head of School of Environmental Sciences, University of East Anglia Professor J Rigby, Department of Geography, Maynooth University Dr Suzanne McLaughlin, Head of Geospatial Systems and Data Management, Land and Property Services, Belfast Mrs C Scott-McAleer, Lecturer, Department of Global Business and Enterprise, Ulster University Mr O McCloskey, Student President, Ulster University
Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator:	Dr P McKenzie, Senior Lecturer, School of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Ulster University
In attendance:	Mrs K McCafferty, Academic Office, Ulster University Ms C Dynes, Students' Union, Ulster University

1 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The Panel met to consider the revalidation of the following provision:

BSc Hons Environmental Science (Single Honours/Major/Main) with CertHE/AB exit awards (Full-time)

BSc Hons Geography (Single Honours/Major/Main) with CertHE/AB exit awards (Full-time)

PgDip/MSc Environmental Management (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) [part-time, fully online]

PgDip/MSc Environmental Management with Geographic Information Systems (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) [part-time, fully online]

PgDip/MSc Environmental Toxicology and Pollution Monitoring (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) [part-time, fully online]

PgDip/MSc Geographic Information Systems (with PgCert/PgDip exit awards) [part-time and full-time, fully online]

The Panel met with the Associate Dean (Education), Head of School and Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator, to discuss how the provision fitted within the Faculty's other provision and discuss such matters as staffing and resources.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Course Submission
- Guidelines for Revalidation Panels
- QAA Master's Degree Characteristics (2015)

- QAA Subject benchmarks for Earth Sciences, Environmental Sciences and Environmental Studies (2014)
- QAA Subject benchmarks for Geography (2015)
- External Examiners' Reports for the past two years (2017/18; 2018/19)
- Preliminary comments from Panel members

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

3.1 Employer Engagement

The Panel noted that the School had organised an employer forum towards the end of 2018, as part of the revalidation process, to find out more about the types of graduate skills being looked for. Discussions at School Board level were also arranged to consider these skills and to plan how they could be achieved by students. The Panel also heard that the University placed great emphasis employability skills and encouraged all schools to form employer forums/boards to engage with the sector and keep up to date with new developments.

Placement was also considered an important part of a student's programme. The Senior Team explained to the Panel that they felt it provided opportunities for students to experience working in areas related to their studies. The School also benefited from making connections with employers during placements by finding out about new developments within the working environment. The Senior Team informed the Panel that students were strongly encouraged during Year 2 to consider a placement as part of their degree.

3.2 Rationale

The Panel noted that Geography and Environmental Sciences had a strong profile within the University. There was good employability for graduates and students were mentored by experienced staff who were able to contribute current research into the provision.

The Panel heard, as part of the restructuring of the School a few years previous, the undergraduate degree in Marine Science had been removed but that the subject area continued to be embedded as a pathway within the BSc Hons Environmental Sciences programme.

The Panel acknowledged the School was performing well against a number of key indicators despite having suffered a reduction in staff numbers. The Panel probed the relationship between the provision now before and after the restructuring and the process for developing the current provision .

The Senior Team explained that Geography and Environmental Sciences were always strong subject areas. During the restructuring process, the range of programmes being delivered was reviewed. The strengths of the School and employability rates were also taken into consideration. The Panel heard that the student intakes for the BSc Hons Marine Science had dipped slightly and the decision was taken to discontinue delivery. The Senior Team informed the Panel that they were now proposing to re-instate the BSc Hons Marine Science. It was noted that this was not part of the provision submitted for revalidation.

The Panel appreciated that the School of Geography and Environmental Sciences was small and was impressed that it had been recognised as being 'academically excellent'. Although staff numbers had reduced, resulting in the number of optional modules decreasing, the Senior Team informed the Panel that staff research continued. The current resources were considered good and part-time teaching hours were available if needed.

Moving forward the Panel noted that two new members of academic staff would be joining the School in December. These staff would focus mainly on the postgraduate provision but would be able to support the undergraduate provision. The Senior Team confirmed that one of the new appointee's was a 'human geographer'.

3.3 Demand

The Panel queried the decline in projected student numbers for the undergraduate provision over the next five years but heard from the Senior Team that there was currently a demographic dip in Northern Ireland.

One of the external panel members mentioned the increasing numbers of students taking GCSE geography in Great Britain referring to this as a sign that the provision was attractive. However, the Senior Team explained that the number of students studying GCSE Geography in Northern Ireland was declining. The Senior Team also explained that student numbers for university full-time provision were capped in Northern Ireland and it was difficult to predict student intakes for the next five years. Looking at the projections, the Senior Team recognised that perhaps they may have been too conservative and acknowledged that it might be useful to review the numbers for the next few years.

The Panel suggested the possibility of introducing a foundation level 3 programme which may help increase student numbers. The Senior Team appreciated the comments but explained that a new programme would require a business plan and additional staff could be difficult to secure. The Panel also noted that there were currently no geography or environmental sciences foundation degrees in the local colleges.

The Senior Team informed the Panel that the School was working on the marketing of the provision to try and attract more students. The Panel noted plans to hold a Year 13/14 summer school to help inform pupils of the various pathways into geography at Coleraine and that through time this exercise might be extended to the environmental sciences programme.

3.4 Combined Subjects

The Panel noted the significant decrease in the number of combined programmes offered by the School and asked why this had happened and if there were other possible combinations that could be explored.

The Senior Team explained that some combinations had disappeared. For example, Geography and German was no longer offered as languages had been withdrawn completely within the University. Other combinations ceased as there was no student uptake. Timetabling was often an issue and with low numbers and a lack of interest the Senior Team explained the decision was taken to go with the stronger combinations.

4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a group of students from both the BSc Hons Geography and BSc Hons Environmental Sciences programmes and one student currently studying on a Master's programme via distance learning. The following points were noted by the Panel:

Student Experience

- The students felt the support from staff was excellent and often an open-door policy applied;

- There was good support for the development of skills in academic writing and doing presentations;
- The field trips were considered an excellent experience and a good way of connecting with each other;
- The students felt they were getting skills that would be important when they graduate including how to prepare CVs and covering letters;
- The students stated that business skills were not covered specifically in any module but that they were aware of the skills they were getting.
- The students felt the 'skills matrix' on Blackboard which showed the breakdown of the skills to be achieved in each module was very informative;
- The students stated that the module dealing with employability was very beneficial;
- The students were happy with their learning environment and advised that they had a communal area where they had the opportunity to chat with research staff and PhD students; an opportunity for the undergraduate students to chat with the postgraduate students to find out about their experience was an area the students felt should be addressed;
- The distance learning student felt part of a learning community. Everything about the provision was well explained; students could email each other; technical issues were reported and addressed quickly and there were opportunities to integrate with each other through webinars.
- Resources were considered good and the laboratories were timetabled;
- The students felt there was a good range of journals;
- The students stated that their student loan was often used for field trips.

Placement

- None of the students present at the meeting had gone on a placement;
- The students explained that some placements were paid and others unpaid. This was considered a strong factor when it came to decide about placement.

EDGE Award

- The students were all aware of the EDGE award;
- Some students had completed volunteering hours or leadership roles within youth groups;
- The students recognised the EDGE award was a valuable part of their CV.

Course Representatives

- The students stated that they were made aware from the start of their studies the role of student representatives;
- The students stated they were inclined to go straight to their lecturer with any issues rather than speak with a student representative;
- The distance learning student informed the panel that online students could raise issues with their e-tutors.
- The students understood the process involved with module evaluation at the end of each module and that their comments could be submitted anonymously. The students stated that they were reminded of the module survey via email.

Teaching, Assessment and Feedback

- Due dates for assignments were provided at the start of each the semester;
- The students appreciated they had to organise their time and plan;

- Written work was submitted through Turnitin;
- Generally, feedback was good but in some instances no feedback was provided;
- The postgraduate students stated that their feedback was exceptional and very beneficial when approaching their next piece of assessment.
- The students were content with the duration of lectures and the recorded lectures were considered useful;
- Students were aware of the new algorithm and felt it was a fair system;
- Some students had a stronger preference for coursework; a small number preferred examinations;

Likes, Dislikes, Improvements

- The students felt 'climate change' should have a stronger presence in the content of the provision.
- Early classes for students travelling a distance were an issue;
- Field trips were considered expensive, but the students appreciated there was good student support from the School
- The students stated they would recommend the provision to other students
- There was strong well-being support on site.
- Postgraduate provision considered excellent value for money.

5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

5.1 Employability Skills

The Panel enquired about employability skills and if the Course Team felt students fully recognised the skills they are getting. The Course Team explained that many of the modules covered skills that would be used in the work environment. Presentation skills were developed more during the second and third year of the provision.

The Panel asked if consideration had been given to where the students would end up working when deciding on appropriate employability skills. The Course Team explained that they were clear where students were currently getting jobs but that they had looked beyond this to determine where else employment could be sought. The Panel noted that a skills audit had been undertaken. Many of the modules were tailored and assessments reviewed to ensure the appropriate skills were being developed.

The Course Team explained a little about the 'skills matrix' which showed students the skills they were achieving in each module. The aim was to try and get students to recognise the skills they were gaining. The Panel noted that the Course Team refreshed module content on a yearly basis based on comments from External Examiners and student representatives. Employer engagement also helped to determine the types of skills students needed to have when entering the working environment.

The Panel asked if future skills could include, for example, '3D data' and heard that this was an area the Course Team was currently exploring. The Panel noted that students were given an introductory level to this subject area but that there were cost constraints.

The Course Team also informed the Panel that two new members of staff starting in December had strong research profiles and that this research could help introduce new modules.

The Course Team explained that they had looked at the essential components for the provision and that they kept in contact with employers to ensure they were aware of new

developments. The programmes were modified in response to these new developments and additional optional modules offered where possible.

The Panel appreciated that it was important to keep up to date with changes and suggested that perhaps 'GIS' may eventually disappear and that there may be a need to re-badge some of the module titles.

The Course Team agreed and recognised that they would need to keep this area under review. The Course Team also stated that the current suite of computer equipment did not fully support all the new developments. The need for additional and upgraded IT hardware and software that supported data sets, for example, was an issue.

5.2 IT Skills

The Panel asked how the Course Team ensured students were getting appropriate IT skills and what further opportunities were being considered. The Course Team mentioned 'drone technology'. Students were given some experience in using 'drones' but it was an expensive option. The Panel also noted that a 'Research Centre' was currently being set up which could lead to providing opportunities for further skills development. The Course Team stated that students would have the opportunity to use a range of technologies when completing their dissertations and that basic skills were covered in the 'EGM Skills Toolbox' module.

The Course Team described the students as being 'scientists' in the area of geography or environmental science. The students were encouraged to look at other opportunities to enhance their learning as their degree would not be enough. For example, the Course Team talked about the EDGE award and DPP/DIAS and how they reminded students of the importance of having the ability to be professional and confident. The Panel noted the focus on getting students to see the skills they had and the importance of extra-curricular activities.

5.3 Placement

The Panel noted that students were encouraged to seek their own placement. The University also engaged with employers and discussed minimum salaries, although some placements remained unpaid.

The Course Team explained that some students wished to work in the National Trust, other third sector organisations, or schools to gain relevant experience. These placements were unpaid.

The Panel noted placements were co-ordinated. Employer visits took place and students were asked to do video blogs. Placements sourced by students were vetted by the subject teams to assure the quality of the student experience.

5.4 Field Trips

The Panel noted that students on both the BSc Hons Geography and BSc Hons Environmental Sciences programmes were required to go on a week-long field trip to a location in another European country. Occasionally some students were unable to participate in the field trip. In such situations an alternative piece of work or 'field school' was organised. If the cost of going on a field trip became an issue, the Course Team explained, there were other options that could be explored, such as assistance from the Student Hardship Fund. The Panel also noted field trip arrangements could be adapted to suit students with a disability. The University strongly supported opportunities for widening participation and the School ensured where possible the needs of disabled students were met.

5.5 Assessment Deadlines

The Panel asked why the deadline for submission of coursework was on a Sunday night. The Panel was of the opinion this should be avoided, particularly, if students had part-time weekend work.

The Course Team explained that students could hand their work in anytime up until the Sunday night and that the decision to move to a Sunday was taken to avoid receiving emails on a Saturday. The Course Team also stated that the postgraduate students tended to do a lot of their work at the weekends.

5.6 Responses to External Examiner Comments

The Panel asked for clarity on the process followed to agree on a response to External Examiner reports and how the Course Team provided feedback to the External Examiners as to how their comments were being actioned.

The Course Team explained that as a team they discussed the comments and fed them into their planning for the next academic year. They were very proud of their provision.

The Panel noted that the External Examiner report went to the Head of School and Course Directors for consideration and to determine how the issue could be addressed. A response was then forwarded to the Associate Dean (Education) for comment. The Course Team informed the Panel that the report also went to the Deputy PVC (Education) who would then ask what was being done to address any issues. The process was clear. The Course Team assured the Panel that each External Examiner received a response and was informed about how issues were being dealt with.

The Panel noted that both the BSc Hons Geography and BSc Hons Environmental Sciences programmes had been recognised by the University as being 'academically excellent'.

The Panel asked if the University ever consulted with staff about current topics of interest to its own policies and practices, such as those addressing environmental concerns or sustainability. . The Panel felt that the School was well placed to provide expert knowledge and to contribute to the discussions. The Course Team stated that they would not normally be consulted about such issues.

5.7 Programme Content

The Panel informed the Course Team that the students had mentioned a desire for a stronger focus on 'climate change' or perhaps a dedicated module. The Course Team explained that students did learn about 'climate change' but that the students who had attended the meeting may not have reached that stage of the programme to be able to comment.

The Course Team explained that staff research was about many of the topical issues such as 'sustainability' and 'zero-carbon' and that their work fed into the modules. There was no specific module on climate change, but the Course Team appreciated it could be a popular module choice.

5.8 Student Representatives

The Course Team informed the Panel that they engaged fully with the student representatives and that formal meetings were held once a semester. The Course Team also informed the Panel they arranged for the students to attend an informal lunch and speak directly with the Head of School and Course Directors about the provision or any issues or suggestions they might have to enhance the provision.

The Panel commented on the fact that students tended to go straight to staff rather than through the student representatives. The UUSU Representative on the Panel explained that student representatives received appropriate training to make students aware of the official process to follow. The UUSU Representative stated that it was important for students to know student representatives could speak for them and asked the Course Team to reinforce this.

The Course Team informed the Panel that student issues were taken seriously and gave an example involving access to computers. The Panel noted the issue was addressed by converting a room into a computer suite and improving wi-fi for final year students.

5.9 Feedback

The Panel advised the Course Team that the response from students on the quantity of feedback varied and asked for further clarification. The Course Team explained there had been lots of discussion around feedback and recognition that staff were individuals and provided feedback in different forms. The Panel heard that new tools had been developed including the use of audio feedback. Staff tended to choose a style that suited them but assured the Panel that students were provided with feedback within 15 days.

5.10 Student Community

The Panel asked how the Course Team helped ensure a student learning community was formed and commented on how the students enjoyed the opportunity of being able to share a room with PhD students.

The Course Team explained that each student went on a field trip at the start of the programme. This was considered a good exercise to introduce the students to each other. The Course Team also stated that group work helped students to mix and work together.

Postgraduate students were encouraged to see themselves as an online community. The Course Team explained the importance of discussion boards and the fact that everyone can see the discussions and make contributions.

6 CONDITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel commended the Course Team on the following:

- A suite of courses with strong academic cohesion, currency and relevance.
- The comprehensive and clearly written and presented documentation.
- Evidence of appropriate national standards are being outlined and met at each level and the expectations of the University's frameworks are strongly apparent in the documentation.
- The achievement of IES recognition of graduates of both the Environmental Science and Geography programmes as Associate Members and provision of a step-up mechanism to higher levels of professional training and recognition.
- The strong evidence of stakeholder engagement and the ways in which the programmes develop skilled graduates for varied job destinations and further study opportunities.

- The support for part-time study at postgraduate level enabling learners to further their skills and education is commendable.
- The strong thread of skills development throughout the programmes to support both subject-specific elements and more transferable graduate qualities.
- Evidence of employability being clearly embedded within the provision, both through specific work-based learning opportunities within the provision and in the accreditation of generic and subject-specific EDGE activities.
- The consistently high NSS results as a strong indicator of sustained academic excellence.
- The evidence of a firmly embedded approach to engaging with students underpinning a high-quality student experience of their learning community
- The prominence of fieldwork across the undergraduate provision which creates a really strong sense of cohesion within the student body and between students and staff.
- The evidence of a range of innovative assessment methods
- An appropriate range of options within the undergraduate provision.
- The strong sense of student engagement with external stakeholders, including schools, policymakers, activists and community groups on local social, political and environmental issues.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the provision be approved for a further five years (intakes 2020/21 to 2024/25 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 **17 December 2019** for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Condition

that the regulatory and standards matters identified by the Academic Office be addressed (appendix).

Recommendations

- (i) That the Faculty consider the development of foundation degree routes to support intakes into the undergraduate provision;
- (ii) That the Faculty explore how formal feedback to External Examiner reports would reflect responses at School, Faculty and University level;
- (iii) That the Subject Team articulate clearly the substantive place of Human Geography within the Geography provision;
- (iv) That the Subject Team review the approach to feedback on summative assessments to increase its utility for students;
- (v) That the Subject Team continue to maintain support for the field work experience;
- (vi) That the Faculty keep under review the provision of unpaid placements, particularly for students undertaking DPP.
- (vii) That the Subject Team work further with UUSU to promote and integrate the system of Student Representatives into the student experience and to support student societies.

APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked all the members of the Panel and, in particular, the external panel members for their valuable contributions to the revalidation exercise.