ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL UNIT 27: SOCIOLOGY (FT/PT) (JN)

3 April 2020

PRESENT:

Dr Michaela Keenan, Associate Dean (Education), Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, Ulster University (Chair)
Dr James Uhomoibhi, Lecturer, School of Engineering, Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, Ulster University
Professor Maggie O'Neill, Professor of Sociology and Head of Department, Department of Sociology, University College Cork
Professor Jason Hughes, Professor Sociology, School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester

IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs Ayla Guarino, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University
Ms Jane Simpson, Support Assistant, Academic Office, Ulster University.

1   INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The panel was convened to consider the following provision:

- Undergraduate Honours Subject Sociology: Single Honours/Major/Minor (with CertHE and AB exit awards)

The subject offers three strands: Single Honours, Major and Minor with the following combinations (all offered in full-time and part-time modes):
BSc (Hons) Sociology (Single Honours)
BSc (Hons) Sociology with Criminology
BSc (Hons) Sociology with Politics
BSc (Hons) Social Policy with Sociology

The provision is delivered in Jordanstown. The full-time mode is normally taught over 3 years or 4 years with optional DPP/DIAS and the part-time mode over 6 years.

There are two exit awards associated with the programmes. Students who successfully complete 120 credit points of level 4 modules may exit with a CertHE. Students who successfully complete 240 credit points of level 4 and 5 may exit with an AB.

Indicative intake figures as provided by the team:

Number of new students	Predicted Enrolments									
	2020-21		2021-22		2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min	Max
Sociology	25	30	25	30	25	30	25	30	25	30
Sociology with Criminology	35	45	35	45	35	45	35	45	35	45
Sociology with Politics	2	10	2	10	2	10	2	10	2	10
Social Policy with Sociology	15	25	15	25	15	25	15	25	15	25
* ASQEC has agreed that as a guideline a minimum enrolment for the first-year cohort be set at 15 per mode, unless full-time and part-time students are to be taught together where the minimum number shall be 15 combined. The students on the programmes listed above are taught together.										

Assessment Rubrics
The Panel was advised that Ms Nicola Bartholomew from Quality Enhancement has reviewed the sample assessment rubrics provided by the course team in the course document and have found them to be sound. Additional comments provided by Ms Bartholomew were shared with the Panel.

2	DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting;
- Course submission;
- Guidelines for Revalidation Panels;
- Information 'Curriculum Design at Ulster';
- External examiners' reports from the last two years;
- UK Quality Code's Subject Benchmark Statement for Sociology, July 2016; and
- Preliminary comments from panel members;

3	MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Panel met with the Senior Management Team comprising Professor Ruth Fee, Associate Dean (Education) of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Kristian Lasslett, Head of School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ms Susannah McCall, Associate Head of School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Dr Ciaran Acton, Revalidation Unit Coordinator and Mr Michael Mahadeo, Course Director.

3.1   Provision Context

The Panel asked the senior staff to elaborate on how the provision sits within the strategic plans and priorities of the Faculty and the School. The senior team advised that the Faculty, which consists of 6 schools, was recently formed following a merger of the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Belfast School of Art and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The subject area of Sociology had a long tradition at Ulster University with strong and sustained student application rates year on year. The Panel was informed of the high levels of student satisfaction, noting 100% NSS scores. The senior team explained that this was due to the dedicated student support provided by the team, specifically required in light of the varied student composition resulting from widening access.

The senior team described the School as research led which focused on applied research informed by the challenges presented in the real world, such as injustice, conflict and inequality, adding that students were encouraged to develop critical faculties to understand society and conduct research.

3.2   Staff Resources

The Panel expressed concern regarding staff's ability to balance their heavy teaching load and their research, especially in light of the small size of the course team. The senior team was confident that the School provided staff with a supportive environment for research and assured the Panel that engagement in research underpinned the Sociology programme. In order to allow staff to dedicate time for research, staff participating in the REF were only allocated 6 hours of teaching per week and staff conducting impact case studies were provided with additional support, including for example further reductions to 4 hours of teaching per week during bottleneck periods. Other avenues of support for staff's research were mentioned, such as the recent introduction of Sabbatical leave and the teaching support provided by PhD students.

Due to the MaSN cap and funding limitations particular to Northern Ireland, which were only expected to deteriorate due to the Coronavirus Pandemic, the senior team explained that they do not expect to be in a position to recruit additional members of staff. However, efficient ways of delivery were being explored, all the while ensuring the quality of the delivery was preserved.

3.3   Student Choice

The Panel queried why student choice was only offered in the final year of study and in only one module. The senior team agreed that a greater range of student choice would be beneficial and explained that this could be facilitated by working in collaboration with teams within the School, such as Criminology and Politics. The senior team explained that this collaboration was made more feasible following the recent amalgamation of schools and assured the panel that they would review this with the aim to produce a collective academic resource and enable course teams to offer more student choice.

3.4   Student Numbers

The senior team explained the reason behind the swing in student intake numbers in the recent year in the Sociology with Criminology and Social Policy with Sociology courses. They attributed the rise in numbers on these two courses to a low number of applications to various other courses in the University in the area of Computing, Engineering and the Ulster

University Business School. This was due to the nature of MaSN, that allowed for more students to be admitted to various AHSS courses, which always experience a high level of demand.

3.5 Contingency Plan for Covid-19

The Panel asked the senior team to outline the University's plan going forward in light of the ongoing pandemic. The senior team explained that the University has been working over the last couple of weeks, at an institutional level, to put plans in place to deal with the crisis. These included alternative forms of teaching and assessment. The senior team assured the Panel that in the short term, alternative ways of teaching and assessment have been introduced for the remainder of the second semester. Due to the immediate nature of the situation, all members of staff made the alterations according to their ability, while mapping assessment against learning outcomes to ensure they were achieved.

Looking ahead into September there will be more time to plan and prepare a robust system going forward, which will include the use of a mixture of online technologies. In addition, online training and support to staff will be offered by Access Digital and Distributed Learning (ADDL) and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP). The senior team added that all planning will take into consideration the wellbeing of both students and staff.

3.6 Staff Wellbeing and Workload

The Panel commended the evident dedication of the course team and the research led modules, expressing concern relating to the labour-intensive employability modules. The senior team assured the Panel that specific focus was given to ensuring there was full transparency and balance, adding that the workload was designed via consensus amongst the team members, with support supplemented by the vibrant PhD community, which assisted with the delivery at levels 4 and 5.

4 MEETING WITH THE COURSE TEAM

4.1 Revalidation Exercise Process

In response to the Panel's request, the team outlined the revalidation exercise process which began just under two years prior to the event. A series of meetings and discussions were held followed by structured support from CHERP, which provided a series of workshops to assist with the process. The programme's philosophy, structure and individual modules have been reviewed to ensure compliance with the University's curriculum design principles. The course was structured in a scaffolded manner, ensuring each module was taught in the appropriate year, anchored by the benchmarks for Sociology. Information had been gathered through consultations with students and with employers via the Employer Advisory Board.

4.2 Assessment

The team acknowledged the Panel's observation regarding the lack of innovative assessment techniques and the high use of exams and agreed to look at more innovative assessment tools. These would include the use of technological tools such as Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Collaborate. The Panel noted that although such technologies have

recently been introduced, due to the Covid-19 crisis, the rollout would need to be gradual to ensure all staff members are confident using these new technologies.

4.3 Staff Resources

The Panel sought further clarification on the management of staff's potential heavy workload, specifically around the four employability modules. The team explained that two of the employability modules were University wide modules (*International Academic Studies* and *Professional Practice*), in which most of the support would be provided by either the host institution or the placement provider. As for the remaining employability modules, the team emphasised the importance and benefits of the *Professional Placement* and *Workplace Ethnography* modules, as they offer final year students the opportunity to implement all they had learned during the course. The Panel were assured that the workload was manageable as the uptake for these modules was low, estimating around 20-30 students.

The team reiterated the transparency and fairness of the workload, with staff who are active in research only teaching 4 or 6 hours per week. PhD support was emphasised as well as the utilisation of the research in the teaching material.

4.4 Internationalisation

In response to the Panel's query, the team explained that Sociology as a subject was well placed to focus on internationalisation. The team explained that case studies were used to explore global perspectives of various topics such as abortion, colonialism, surveillance, digital identity and global inequality.

4.5 Gender

The Panel enquired how the topic of gender was embedded throughout the provision. The team explained that gender and other core issues were embedded within the context of various modules, giving the example of topics such as abortion, representation in the media, religion, gender and educational achievement and gender in relation to sports.

4.6 Employer Advisory Board

The team advised that the Employer Advisory Board, initially introduced by the PVC for Education, has proven to be very successful. The board, which was comprised of 10 organisations and met three times a year, was instrumental in the revalidation process, informing course structure and content.

4.7 Assessment

The Panel asked for the mechanisms for assessment going forward, especially in light of the Covid-19 crisis and the potential of moving to online teaching. The struggles of moving to teaching and assessment online was discussed. The team advised that a number of exams had already been replaced by other forms of assessment, such as essays, adding that they ensured all the learning outcomes had been met. The Panel was made aware that the current situation may potentially cause difficulties to students, for example those living in rural areas with weak internet connection or those with no personal computers following the closure of the library. The Panel was assured that this will be taken into account to ensure no student would be disadvantaged.

4.8   Assessment of Specific Modules:

Module SOP101: Introduction to Social Policy
The Panel asked the team to explain the rationale behind basing 10% of the module's assessment on attendance and participation. The team explained that this was in response to low attendance numbers and agreed to consider revising the assessment to solely be based on participation and not attendance.

Module SOC517: Dissertation
In response to the Panel's query, the team explained that while they were aware of the assessment workload equivalence guide, they felt the 8,000-word long assessment for this 20-credit point module was appropriate. The team was of the opinion that 8,000 words would be the minimum word count to enable students to produce a dissertation. To ensure the workload was fair, a *Research Methodology* module was offered in semester 1, in which students completed much of the initial work relating to the dissertation, such as finding a dissertation advisor, conducting research on their chosen topic and developing a proposal which included a draft literature review and methodology.

Modules SOC308: Classical Sociological Theory and SOC505: Contemporary Sociological Theory
The Panel queried the use of a 3-hour exam in these two modules, feeling this was out of kilter with the 2-hour exams used in other modules. The team was of the opinion that, as these were theoretical based examinations, this was suitable to allow students the time to express their views in full. The team added that the second item of assessment in these modules had been reduced to align with the assessment workload equivalence guide.

5   CONCLUSIONS

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

- The impressive and enthusiastic team, providing students with a wonderful learning experience. The staff student engagement and the team's passion for their students learning and their subject was evident in their engagement with the revalidation process.
- The way the team manage the tensions between being excellent teachers and active researchers, which is clearly evident through the research-led curriculum and staff CVs.
- The way in which employability has been embraced and embedded into the curriculum, and the active and meaningful engagement with employers through the Employer Advisory Board.
- The quality of the detailed course documentation, including the attention to detail in the mapping of learning outcomes and curriculum development.
- The excellent quality assurance indicators, specifically the exceptional NSS score and the external examiners' reports.
- The theory and methods and methodological approaches and how these are all linked through into active learning and employability building skills for employability.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the provision be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2020/21 – 2024/25) 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 15 May 2020 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.

Recommendations

   i)   Review and revise the module learning outcomes at Level 6.

   ii)   Keep under review the assessment approach. Look at the dependency on exams to find points going forward where this dependency might be reduced and the use of digital assessment techniques where available and appropriate, increased.

   iii)   Keep gender under review and make sure that its inclusion remains strong inside the curriculum.

   iv)   Consider the inclusion of digital globalisation cases in the curriculum.

   v)   Emphasise in the document the research ethos of the team within the rationale and ethos section of the document.

   vi)   Continue to explore opportunities to give students a greater range of options particularly at Level 5 (Year 2).

6   APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members and, in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the validation process, particularly so under the exceptional circumstances they are facing due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Ref: AGu/panelreport/20/4/2020