

## ULSTER UNIVERSITY

### REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE EVALUATION PANEL UNIT 4Aii: MSc GLOBAL STRATEGY IN ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY (FT/PT) (DL)

2 October 2019

#### PRESENT:

Mrs Danielle McWall, (Chair), Head of Department, Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics, Ulster University

Ms Sara Boyd, Lecturer in Environmental Health Risk Management, Dublin Institute of Technology

Mr Maurice Brennan, Honorary Senior Lecturer, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham

#### IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs A Guarino, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University

Mr Gary McFarlane, Director - Northern Ireland, Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH)

#### APOLOGIES

Ms Louise O'Boyle, Associate Head of School, Belfast School of Art, Ulster University

## 1 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

The Panel was convened to consider the provision of Master of Science in Global Strategy in Environmental Health and Sustainability. The proposed course is a new specialist programme primarily focused on the global dimension of environmental health and the role it could play, in collaboration with other disciplines, in the delivery of the 17 sustainable development goals of the United Nations.

The degree will address a key niche in the global market and was designed to bring together Environmental Health and allied professionals as well as professionals from unrelated disciplines, from both local and international markets, to produce graduates who can deliver impact on both the local and the world stages. It will be research informed from the work undertaken in the Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment and will provide a platform in which new research activity can be based. Prior to commencement in September 2020, professional accreditation of the programme will be sought with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH).

The proposed provision will be delivered fully online in full-time and part-time modes and will be offered from September 2020. The full-time mode will normally be taught over 3 semesters of study and the part-time mode over 6 semesters of study. Each student will

complete six 20 credit-point modules (two of which are compulsory) and a compulsory 60 credit-point Dissertation module.

There are two exit awards associated with the programme. A PgCert may be awarded to students who successfully complete 60 credit points. A PgDip may be awarded to students who successfully complete 120 credit points. The MSc would be awarded after subsequent satisfactory completion of the 60 credit-point dissertation (180 credit points in total).

MSc Global Strategy in Environmental Health and Sustainability: Indicative minimum and maximum intake figures

Year	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/24	
	Min	Max								
FT	9	15	9	15	12	20	15	25	15	25
PT	6	10	6	10	8	15	10	15	10	15

## 2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting;
- Course submission;
- Guidelines for Evaluation Panels;
- QAA Characteristics Statement, Master's Degree, September 2015;
- QAA Earth Sciences, Environmental Sciences and Environmental Studies, October 2014;
- CIEH Professional Standards Framework;
- Preliminary comments from panel members; and
- Reports from central University departments on Library and IT resource matters.

## 3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Panel met with the Senior Management Team comprising Dr Michaela Keenan, Associate Dean (Education) of the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, Professor Neil Hewitt, Head of Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Dr Neale Blair, Associate Head of Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, and Mr Robert Cameron, Chair of the Course Planning Committee.

### 3.1 Provision Context

The Panel expressed how impressed they were with this innovative and unique provision, and with how it aligned with real world needs, and asked how the provision sat within the School's context. The senior team discussed how the provision linked with Ulster University's Strategic Plan 5&50, describing it as a flexible provision with varied delivery capabilities and innovative presentation. Core to the delivery was the support offered to students with Environmental Health mentioned as exemplary within the School as having achieved 90%-100% NSS scores with the Undergraduate provisions.

The senior team described their vision of linking undergraduate and postgraduate programmes together, envisioning the provision in the future would not be an isolated stand-alone course but part of a wider structure.

The senior team explained how distance learning was well established within the Faculty, having an extensive experience of delivering online programmes dating back to the time they were first offered in 2001. The senior team advised the Panel of numerous programmes being offered fully online and of the mechanisms for online delivery (such as the use of e-tutors, online work groups etc.) which have been well tried and tested.

### 3.2 Online Delivery and Staff Support

The Panel asked the senior team to elaborate on the practicalities of the provision's online delivery. The senior team described a list of teaching techniques such as: live streaming, pre-recorded lectures, podcasts, interactive discussion boards, active participation as well as simulation, explaining that a mix of both live and recorded material would be most suitable due to the international composition of the student cohort. The Panel noted that all material will be readily accessible for students via Ulster University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard Learn.

In response to a query from the Panel, the senior team assured the Panel of the exceptional support they have received from the Access, Digital and Distributed Learning (ADDL) team. The course team has been working closely with a dedicated member of the ADDL team who had been involved from the initial stage of conception and all the way throughout the design process. Mentioning the Digital Learning Resource Agreement, which was signed with ADDL, the senior team explained that there would be an intensive period of support in the stages coming up to delivery as well as continuous support after the programme is up and running. Furthermore, the senior team pointed out that the individual providing support to the School from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP), used to be part of the ADDL team, thus has specific relevant experience and knowledge pertaining to online delivery.

The senior team also informed the Panel that a number of the course team members had previous experience of online delivery. Due to the collaborative ethos of the team, their experience proved extremely valuable both due to their input in the design stages of the provision and the support provided to other staff members not experienced in online delivery.

### 3.3 Staff Resources

In response to a question from the Panel, the senior team advised that initially staff members will take on the role of e-tutors, emphasising the benefits this would have on the ability to accurately review the provision in its initial stages. The Panel also noted that all teaching staff would undertake an online e-tutor course qualifying them as e-tutors. The senior team assured the panel, that the student numbers were expected to be on an upwards trajectory, and should student numbers grow, further resources, namely additional staff members, would be added as required.

The Panel was assured by the Head of School and Associate Head of School that staff's workload would be reviewed and the time dedicated to the delivery of the provision would be taken into account to ensure staff would not be overburdened, adding that additional support would be brought in as needed.

### 3.4 Online Support

The Panel queried if there were mechanisms put in place to deal with unforeseen circumstances such as the collapse of the online system. The senior team described a mirror site which has been set up for such situations, adding that all scheduled downtime would be widely communicated to both students and staff. The Panel noted that in addition to the ISD support available during core working hours, additional dedicated support would be available for staff and students 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

### 3.5 September 2020 Start

In response to the Panel's query regarding the structure and delivery of the provision, the senior team explained that although consideration was initially given to having two intakes per year (January and September), or a carousel method (with multiple intakes per year), in the first instance, the provision will only have a September intake for both full-time and part-time provisions. The senior team were advised that they will need to submit a CA3 if they wished to introduce a January start down the line (depending on student numbers and demand) and were informed that the course structure and module instances described in the course document would need to be revised to reflect one intake per year.

### 3.6 Accreditation

In response to a query from the Panel, the senior team explained that they would seek accreditation of the programme with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) prior to commencement in September 2020. Accordingly, the provision was designed following close consultation with the CIEH and aligned with its framework. Mr Gary McFarlane, Director - Northern Ireland of the CIEH, who attended the meeting, explained that their organisation was currently in the process of reviewing and revising the accreditation process. Mr McFarlane advised that if the review process was not complete by September 2020, CIEH would offer an interim statement of endorsement of the provision.

### 3.7 English Language Requirements

The senior team advised the Panel that the standard English language requirement for admission to the programme aligned with the standard University requirement, which was a minimum English level of IELTS 6.0 or equivalent, with no band score under 6, adding that this standard was used across the Faculty.

### 3.8 Stakeholders' Involvement

The Panel was advised that the MSc Global Strategy in Environmental Health and Sustainability was informed by industry needs and feedback from key stakeholders. Consultations were conducted with existing students of Ulster's undergraduate course in Environmental Health and with professional advisory units at Ulster University such as ADDL and CHERP. In addition, an extensive consultation process was undertaken with a range of external stakeholders such as the Local Environmental Health Practitioners – Environmental Health NI (EHNI), the International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH), and the CIEH.

## 4 MEETING WITH THE COURSE TEAM

### 4.1 Online Delivery Methods

The Panel commended the team on the forward-thinking nature of the programme and asked them to outline their preparedness for online delivery. The team reiterated the online delivery experience of some of the teaching staff described by the senior team, stressing the numerous benefits of the e-tutor course which all staff members would undertake.

In response to the Panel's request for clarification relating to online delivery methods, the team described Ulster University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard Learn, where both live and recorded material would be accessible to the students. Accessibility and ease of use of the VLE was noted by the Panel. The Panel was assured that the VLE will be utilised by students to upload work, which, in turn, would further encourage student participation and enable staff to provide students with efficient and prompt feedback.

Simulations and virtual field trips were mentioned by the team by way of exemplifying other innovative tools for online delivery alongside live streaming, podcasts, video capture and discussion groups.

As part of the online delivery, the team explained that guest lecturers would be invited to provide experiential learning, to place learning in context and provide real life application in various work environments. In response to the Panel's query regarding how these lectures would be delivered, the team explained that guest lecturers would be invited to provide material for inclusion on the taught modules. Various delivery mechanisms were mentioned by the team, such as podcasts, interviews and debates, these would greatly rely on the preference and availability of the lecturer. The Panel suggested the use of recorded conference lectures, if permission was granted.

### 4.2 Student Support

The Panel enquired how the team would support underperforming or non-engaging students. The team explained that, as the provision was a postgraduate one with the majority of student expected to be in employment, the expectation is to have highly motivated students, and that underperformance or non-engagement would be very rare. However, the team assured the Panel there were robust mechanisms in place to support students and ensure engagement. Managing expectations from students from the onset and outlining availability of staff and the timing of live delivery and communication were discussed. In addition, the team mentioned there were a number of tools in the Ulster's Digital Learning Environment (DLE) that help tutors monitor student engagement. Each student would be allocated a studies advisor who would provide both academic and pastoral support. Additionally, the team felt the academic mentoring programme offered by the course team would provide further developmental support to students.

The Panel queried how the team would provide support to students with diverse English language capabilities. The team assured the Panel that they would have mechanisms in place to support students experiencing difficulties with academic writing in English, such as having the option of submitting drafts in order to receive feedback on their work. In addition, the University offers online support on academic writing. Students would be able to upload a draft of their work for review and feedback. The team added that this had proven popular in the past with distance learning students.

### 4.3 Simulations

The Panel were of the opinion that the use of simulation in teaching was extremely valuable, and asked the team to elaborate on the use of it in the delivery of the programme. The team explained that simulation would be used in Emergency Planning, Response and Resilience module. As part of the delivery of the module, teaching staff would create simulations through Blackboard Learn enabling students to actively participate in simulated research case scenarios or work through statistical problems and engage in experiential learning in a controlled environment.

### 4.4 Environmental Protection and Sustainable Technologies Module

The Panel raised a concern relating to the Environmental Protection and Sustainable Technologies module (ENH703), in which the students would be expected to identify and analyse a business, enterprise or facility and produce a report which would count towards 100% of the assessment. The Panel asked the team what mechanisms were in place for addressing situations in which students would struggle identifying a research subject. The team assured the Panel that in these situations they would have available for students a fictitious case which would include all necessary background and data.

### 4.5 Research Methods and Project Module

The Panel commended the academic research paper the students would be required to produce as part of the assessment of the Research Methods and Project module (ENH821), noting that this would have the potential to lead to a publication. The Panel suggested the team consider introducing a research proposal to be submitted instead of an academic research publication, one which would have the potential of being submitted for funding down the line.

### 4.6 Course Structure

The Panel asked for clarification in relation to the course structure, specifically the element of choice provided to students. The team explained that during the initial design stages the course team had considered offering a larger variety of possible modules but concluded that a large number of modules would run the risk of diluting the size of the classes hence hindering students' experience. The course team's discussion as well as consultation with stakeholders, lead to the decision that in addition to the Research Methods and Project module (ENH821), Law and Sustainability in Global Context module (ENH705) and Sustainable Development – Strategy for a Secure Future (ENH700) would be compulsory, and the remaining modules would be optional to allow for some element of choice to suit personal preference and professional needs.

In response to a query from the Panel, the team clarified that the programme would be offered as a Master's with PgCert and PgDip exit awards and not as a linked Master's.

### 4.7 Academic Integrity

The Panel queried how the team would ensure academic integrity, specifically with the provision being delivered online. The team explained that *Turnitin* would be used to check all submitted work in order to prevent plagiarism.

#### 4.8 Staff Resources

The Panel was of the view that delivering online modules would have similar time demands on staff as campus-based modules and expressed concern regarding staff's workload. The team reaffirmed the commitment from the Head of School and Associate Head of School that the time dedicated to the delivery of the provision would be taken into account when considering staff's workload and that additional support would be brought in as needed.

#### 4.9 Internationalisation

The Panel queried how the team would ensure the modules would not solely focus on Northern Ireland or Europe but would have an international perspective. The Panel gave the example of Housing and Communities module (ENH704), asking if the module would include Housing and Shelter under the broad UN definition. The team explained that environmental health issues and sustainability were truly international in their character and that internationalism would be embedded within the modules' contents. The team added that students would also be encouraged to examine the laws and standards within their respective countries.

Panel suggested the team add to the module description of the Housing and Communities module a reference to sustainable development linked to housing and communities and revise the module title to include sustainable development.

#### 4.10 Evaluation and Improvement of the Provision

The team assured the Panel, that there were robust mechanisms in place to review the provision annually, giving the examples of the online student questionnaires to evaluate teaching and assessment methods; the staff consultative committee to review and action any issues that arise; the annual monitoring and review in the Continuous Assurance of Quality Enhancement process; and the external moderation of assessment, achieved through external examiner oversight.

The team reiterated their close links with local employers and the CIEH, explaining that consultation with the Industrial Liaison Panel, which would meet at least once a year, would further inform any changes to the course structure and the modular content.

#### 4.11 Delivery Logistics

The Panel queried the logistic of delivering live content considering the expected constraints of various time zones. The team committed to 9 hours a week of contact time, explaining that in order to address the time differences, they would outline to students, from the onset, timing of live delivery and staff availability.

The team added that, in line with University regulations, feedback would be provided within 15 working days. In regard to response to emails, as there were no University guidelines, the team would agree clear parameters, to ensure consistency in response times. The team added that discussion boards would provide an additional venue for students to seek advice from the other students or the e-tutor.

#### 4.12 Study Skills

The Panel queried how study skills would be embedded throughout the programme. The team explained critical thinking and reflective skills were core to the programme, adding that the programme was designed around the development of students' study skills. Students would develop their critical reading and listening skills in various modules, as well as reflective and critical analysis skills.

The team discussed various learning strategies which would be introduced, giving the examples of reflective report writing, peer-review exercises, use of case studies and an active learning environment in which staff would guide and challenge the discussion.

The team assured the Panel that emphasis was put on developing students' critical thinking skills as this was a constantly evolving and dynamic field resulting in much of the taught knowledge soon becoming obsolete.

#### 4.13 Marketing and Career Prospects

The team explained that Environmental Health was an international discipline and that they would rely on Ulster University's central marketing team to promote the course internationally. However, the team added that there was a large local and national market as the course provided opportunities for progression from a variety of undergraduate study as well as upskilling for those professionals already working in the field and even those from unrelated disciplines.

The Panel noted the wide range of career prospects graduates would have both with local employers and large international companies, and conveyed to the team that that it would be important to guide the students and encourage them to 'think big and go global' as many of the job opportunities that would be available for them upon graduation might not currently exist.

### 5 CONCLUSIONS

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

- The innovative and unique nature of the programme;
- The Globalisation aspect of the provision, which is in line with market needs;
- The obvious evidence of engagement with Professional Bodies;
- The clear support provided by ADDL and colleagues with experience of online delivery; and
- The motivational and enthusiastic team.

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 13 November 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.

## Recommendations

- i) That due consideration is given to the breakdown of the live streaming, podcasts, video capture, discussion groups and so on, across the modules, and to the timetabling and resourcing of these;
- ii) That the team explore more innovative teaching techniques in online delivery, such as immersive technologies;
- iii) That all reading lists on all modules be updated;
- iv) That the team consider further optionality as the programme develops;
- v) That the title of module ENH701 be revised to include standards;
- vi) That the title and module description of module ENH704 include reference to sustainable development; and
- vii) That the team consider introducing a research proposal to module ENH821.

## 6 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members and, in particular, the external members, for their valuable contribution to the validation process. The external Panel members commended the University and particularly the Academic Office for the professional planning and execution of the event.