

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE EVALUATION PANEL FOR MSC IN FASHION AND TEXTILE RETAIL MANAGEMENT

12 April 2018

PRESENT: Professor C Nugent, Head of School Computing, Ulster University (Chair)
Mr M Bastin, Pathway Leader, MA Fashion Marketing and Branding, University of Southampton's Winchester School of Art
Mrs A Nevins, MA Fashion Management with Marketing Programme Leader, De Montfort University, Leicester
Dr B Mason, Lecturer, Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing, Ulster University Business School

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Troy, Academic Office, Ulster University
Mrs A Guarino, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

The panel was convened to consider the MSc Fashion and Textile Retail Management. The proposed course will be offered at the Belfast campus in full-time mode over one calendar year (3 semesters) and part-time over two calendar years (6 semesters). It comprises one 40 and one 20 credit module in semesters 1 and 2 (full-time) followed by a 60 credit point Master's project in semester 3. All modules are compulsory. A PgDip exit award exists for those exiting prior to undertaking the 60 credit point Master's project and having successfully completed 120 credit points. Two modules – Design Thinking and Creative Entrepreneurship – would be shared with the MA Product Design.

The programme addresses the priorities of Belfast City Council's strategic economic development plan and was also part of the new Faculty's strategic plan to be launched in Autumn 2017 in the general area of creative industries.

It offers a progression route for graduates of related undergraduate degrees and was suited to creative individuals with business, retail or other experience and who wished to develop creative management, innovative product development or leadership roles in the fashion and textile retail industry. One day per week/term time delivery is available for the latter.

Employers had had a significant input into the development of the programme and have confirmed support in terms of releasing staff to undertake it and there was also potential for elements to be delivered in industry settings.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Course submission;
- Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels;
- QAA subject benchmark statement for Master's Degree Characteristics (2015);
- Reports from central University departments on Library and IT resource matters;
- Preliminary comments from Panel members.

Prior to the meeting, the Panel were taken on a tour of the facilities available to support delivery of the provision by the Associate Head of Belfast School of Art, Ms Rachel Dickson and the Chair of Course Planning Committee Mrs Maureen Collins. The Panel found the tour to be beneficial and informative and considered the facilities to be excellent.

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

3.1 Background and Rationale

The Panel asked the Team to elaborate on how the programme sits within the strategic plans and priorities of the University and the Faculty. The Associate Dean (Global Engagement) described Ulster University's Strategic Plan 5&50, and how the programme aligned with its four areas of focus (civic contribution, academic excellence, global vision and operational excellence). In line with the Strategic Plan, the Team highlighted the University's focus on global recruitment and how this is reflected in the provision to attract both local and international students. Civic engagement was also highlighted as well as describing the extensive consultation and collaboration with the local Belfast creative industry. The School was engaging with the STEM agenda through the creative industries as well as developing collaborative links with colleagues from the Business School in this regard. This area had a real contribution to make to the local and regional economy.

In response to the Panel's query the Team stated that the programme would fit with the strategic aims and key priorities of the Faculty, which is now looking at adding further progression points to current graduates, in addition to addressing the needs of industry both locally and internationally. A gap had been identified in the current portfolio of programmes within the School for progression for undergraduate students. This programme was a step towards closing this gap. It was the intention for Master's provision to grow from the current 2 programmes on offer to 7 Master's programmes by 2019.

3.2 Resources

The Team assured the Panel that all staffing and physical resources were in place to support this course. In relation to any further expansion, additional strategic posts were being developed for all new Master's provision. The Executive Dean had already confirmed a commitment in terms of resources across all courses within the School.

3.3 Marketing and Expansion

The Panel asked for clarification on the proposed student intake. The Team admitted that although aspirational, from their initial consultation with both industry and students, a total of 25 students, 10 full-time and 15 part-time, would seem realistic. The Team added that the course is currently being promoted internationally and with 3rd year students, subject to approval.

In response to the Panel's concern regarding sustainability in case of growth in student numbers, the Team reaffirmed the commitment from the Executive Dean that additional resources would be provided in regards to staffing. In addition, other resources could be used to support expansion of international students, such as the use of lecture capture as an online resource which had already been used in the existing online MA Photography

The Panel commended the unique character of the programme and queried how this will be marketed internationally. The Team explained that internationally they would be focusing on the Asian and South Asian markets, specifically the Far East and China. When marketing, they would promote their various strengths, such as the recent REF success, excellent teaching reviews and industry links.

3.4 Course Design

The Panel was assured that the Ulster University Business School had been working closely with the Belfast School of Art, involved both in the Course design and contribution to content. The collaborative approach had been a very positive experience and facilitated the added dimension of developing business acumen within the programme. The Team explained that the course had been designed according to the need for relevant career pathways and progression of existing and past students as well the local industry needs. Information had been gathered through consultations with students, surveys and consultations with multiple employers.

4 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

4.1 Course Structure

In response to the Panel's request, the Team provided a short description of the modules offered. The course provided opportunities for progression from undergraduate study but also upskilling for those already working in the industry. Key strategic drivers were shaping and informing practice and these were incorporated into the programme.

The Panel asked how the Team, in developing the provision, had taken account of the University policies and principles in areas such as curriculum design, learning and teaching, assessment and feedback, graduate qualities and employability. The Team replied that they had also thoroughly engaged with these principles while going through another course revalidation the year prior. Programme and individual modules had been reviewed to ensure compliance with the University's curriculum design principles, to include reducing assessment and the number of module learning outcomes.

In response to the Panel's query regarding the lack of module options or pathways, the Team advised that in addition to the Master's project which allows for flexibility, they would consult with students and tailor the module assessments around their areas of interest. Furthermore, the Team advised that personal feedback and mentoring would be offered to provide a meaningful and relevant teaching experience.

The Panel asked if modules would be shared with other cohorts. The Team explained that this would be the case in the Design Thinking module, with 40-50 students from a number of courses, including the MFA, undertaking this module as part of their course. This also provided invaluable opportunities for students to engage with other disciplines. The Team added that this would contribute to the Belfast School of Arts Master's identity they were aspiring to foster, encouraging a sense of belonging and mutual pollination of the different Master's courses within the School.

4.2 Assessment Strategy

The Panel expressed concern regarding disparity of credit points across the different modules in respect of the PT provision, and the imbalance of assessment across all modules. More specifically, the Panel mentioned the Fashion and Textile Retailing Master's Project, and queried word count allocation for both the coursework and the final project, suggesting that the overall word count should be much higher. The Team will review and amend as advised. Word counts for assessments of a practical nature were set on the basis of equivalency.

In response to a concern raised regarding the risk of failure in the 40 credit point module, the Team explained that from experience in other courses, this would be highly unlikely as they would provide a strong element of pastoral care and frequent feedback as well as regular meetings with individual students throughout the module.

In response to the Panel's query, the Team described the various assessment methods which would be used, including academic writing and presentation. Specifically, the Team explained that focusing on presentation skills would be highly beneficial for students, as this would be an integral part of any career path chosen within this industry.

4.3 Admission and Entry Requirements

The Panel queried the background of the students allowed on the programme, more specifically, how students from a non-cognate background would be supported. The Team explained that they would allow students from all backgrounds onto the programme, including from such backgrounds as Health Care, and Mathematics as the same underpinning processes and methodologies would be used.

The Panel suggested that a score of 6.0 in IELTS appeared low for a programme of this type, suggesting further provisions such as weekly English lessons may be beneficial for international students. The Team responded that this was the School's standard but would seek advice from the International Office as the international student numbers grow.

4.4 Research Methods and Study Skills

The Panel queried in which part of the programme research methods would be delivered. The Team explained that this would be covered initially in the Design Thinking module, in semester 1, but further embedded and developed throughout the course and in tutorials. This would include development of study skills and critical thinking and analysis. Content would be adapted to the students' specific areas of interests and through negotiation with employers. In addition, prior to the project in semester 3, there would be a two day summer school to advise and guide students on their perspective research, in addition to mentors that would be in place to guide them. There would also be a focus on peer learning and creating a supporting network for students. The module and course coordinator would be available to advise and direct students to employers with mutual interests.

The Panel commended the offer of a summer school and suggested the summer school be made explicit in the Course document.

In response to the Panel's query regarding an international dimension in the curriculum, the Team explained that many of the topics covered have an international aspect to them, in addition to the study of international case studies such as international brands, comparisons between the north and south of the EU, and issues related to the World Health Organisation. Furthermore, the ways in which religious and cultural norms affect fashions are also covered throughout the course.

4.5 Student Support

The Panel queried how the Team would provide support to students with diverse backgrounds, such as those coming from an industry background, or mature students, who might lack the study skills required. The Team assured the Panel that they would have robust mechanisms in place to support students having difficulties with their studies. They explained that in addition to the Design Thinking module, during the comprehensive induction programme, each student would be allocated a studies advisor who would provide both academic and pastoral support, and interactive workshops tailored to each student's needs and interests would be offered. The School also had in place a residency hub and this provided students with an area in which to engage with and talk to other students.

Provision would be made for mature students requiring additional support with specific software such as Photoshop, to attend classes with undergraduate students. Similarly, staff could avail of screencasts to maintain their own digital literacy skills.

Further work may be required in relation to support for international students going forward should these numbers increase.

In response to the Panel's query, the team explained that during induction students would be given the opportunity to raise any disability or difficulty with which they might need support. In addition, if applicable, special support and allowances would be offered to any student suffering from any disability, such as mental health issues, dyslexia or other learning difficulties.

4.6 Student Experience Principles

The Panel asked how the Student Experience principles were embedded into the programme. The Team explained that although ensuring all principles were embedded, employability was key focus of the School. They were 3% above national average in terms of graduate employment. During programme design, they engaged widely with, for example, Invest NI, InterTradeIreland and local industries and were also involved with KTP and Innovation Voucher schemes.

The Team named Fashion Management at Belfast Met in response to the Panel's query regarding competing courses in the area.

4.7 E-learning and Digital Resources

In relation to digital literacy and the development of these skills, the Team stated that teaching and communication including provision of course and module handbooks, timetables as well as assessment submission and feedback where possible, would be done using the Visual Learning Environment, BlackBoard Learn, which was supported by an app available to all students. A flipped classroom model would also be used. Students would also have access to the University's software licences for 3 years post-graduation.

4.8 Research Informed Curriculum and Teaching

The Panel commended the Team for their HEA membership and the research underpinning their teaching, and asked whether students would be encouraged to conduct and publish their own research. The Team stated that the teaching and research nexus would be embedded throughout the programme. HEA accreditation had been very positive for staff not least in enhancing their own pedagogy. Students would be encouraged to publish their work as well as take advantage of other opportunities such as presenting posters at conferences or participating in competitions.

The Panel asked if PhD opportunities would be promoted. The Team explained that this would be discussed with students as they would progress with their Master's project and funding opportunities would be explained.

4.9 Staff Resources

The Panel expressed concern that many of the responsibilities laid with the Course Director/module coordinator of the Master's project. The Team advised that this was not uncommon within the School and assured the Panel that a range of staff with relevant expertise would be involved with programme delivery.

4.10 Work Experience

The Panel queried whether there was a clear guidance regarding the length of the work experience required and whether placements were normally paid or unpaid. The Team replied that work experience opportunities would be based on the opportunities available at the time. Regarding payment, although it would eventually be a product of negotiation between the employers and the students, initial consultation with the

employer would set the expectation that that a postgraduate level of pay would be the norm. For students in full-time work, employers have consented allowance of 1 day a week release to undertake the course

4.11 Marketing

The Panel expressed concern that marketing the Course as requiring a 1 day a week commitment may be misleading, as this set expectations that all academic and extra-curricular requirements would be fulfilled within that timeframe. It was suggested that all published course material be revised to reflect realistic time demands of the Course.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the programmes on the following:

- The team effort in preparing the documentation;
- The very strong industry relationships and collaboration with the local Belfast creative industry and the positive impact this has on the course;
- The focus on entrepreneurship;
- The awareness and embedding of Internationalisation in the curriculum;
- The professional expertise of the teaching staff who are very supportive to students;
- The enthusiasm and passion of the cohesive course team and the excellent rapport they have with students.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programme be approved for a period of four years (intakes 2018/19 to 2021/22 inclusive) to align with the revalidation schedule for Unit 2C Applied Arts, 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 31 May 2018** for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Conditions

- i) That all issues identified by the Academic Office and detailed in the appendix to the panel report are addressed;
- ii) To undertake a review of the module descriptions to demonstrate how the curriculum design principles have been adopted and to ensure a balance of assessments across all modules and learning outcomes (section 4.2 refer);
- iii) That research methods are sufficiently embedded throughout the course to ensure adequate coverage and preparation for the Master's project. This should include a number of touch points throughout both semesters to bring students and mentors together for discussion and guidance. (section 4.4 refer);

Recommendations

- i) To include the details of the summer school in the revised module description (section 4.4 refer);
- ii) To provide clarification on all aspects of placement arrangements to include if these are paid/unpaid (section 4.10 refer);
- iii) That the real expectations of the time commitment required for the course beyond one day per week are set out clearly in publicity and marketing material (section 4.11 refer);.

6 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel, particularly the external members, and the Course Team for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process.

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