

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL FOR UNIT 1Ai ACCOUNTING (UG/JN) AND EVALUATION OF POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA ACCOUNTING

1 October 2019

PRESENT: Dr Catrin Rhys, Head of School of Communications and Media, Ulster University (Chair)
Dr Sharon McClements, Lecturer in Built Environment, Belfast School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Ulster University
Dr Karim Sorour, Associate Professor and Head of Accounting subject, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University
Professor Andrew Vivian, Professor of Finance, School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University
Mr Ronan O'Loughlin, Director of Education and Training Chartered Accountants Ireland

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Troy, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University

1 BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

The panel was convened to consider the following provision.

- BSc Hons Accounting and Management (with CertHE and AB exit awards) (PT/JN)
- BSc Hons Finance and Investment Management (with CertHE and AB exit awards) (FT/JN)
- BSc Hons Accounting (pathways in Accounting, Forensic Services, Financial Economics, Management Consulting) (with CertHE and AB exit awards) (FT/JN)
- BSc Hons Accounting and Law (FT/JN) (joint with School of Law, Faculty of Social Sciences)

New provision:

- Postgraduate Diploma Accounting (FT/JN)

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

1. Course submission;
2. Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels;
3. UK Quality Code's subject benchmark statements for Accounting (2016); Finance (2016); Business and Management (2015); Law (2015); and Business and Management Master's degree characteristics (2015);
4. External examiners' reports for the last two years;
5. Preliminary comments from Panel members.

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

3.1 Background and developments

The Panel asked the Senior Team to set out how the programmes had developed since the last revalidation. They were advised that the key change was to give students more choice

and was the main reason for the introduction of accounting pathways. This course was an efficient use of resource as many modules were already offered on other programmes. The pathways allowed flexibility for students to choose their own preferred subject area, with staff support provided in that process, and a programme of guest speakers in place to provide direct industry engagement with the different areas. Although many students still chose straight accounting and the numbers for the specialist pathways were small, it was important to offer this choice. Northern Ireland was very much a growth area in finance and these courses, and other finance related courses available in the Department, produced graduates to meet industry demand. Both Department and the Ulster Business School were very active in the sector.

Preparation for revalidation was an iterative process involving discussions with industry and professional bodies - one direct change was that *Governance, Risk and Ethics* was now compulsory on every pathway and all courses. No major changes had been made in the programmes but some simple but effective changes included an increase in data analytics coverage as well as three modules to embed project based learning and the development of the softer skills. It was noted that content was constrained to some extent by professional body requirements.

3.2 New course proposal

The Panel enquired as to the rationale for the new Level 7 PgDip Accounting for which students could gain professional exemptions 1 – 9, the same as for an undergraduate accounting student. The Senior Team explained that it was not possible to do ACCA 1- 9 on a full-time basis in Northern Ireland and that this course was targeted at students from non-cognate backgrounds who wished to pursue a career in accounting. It was a risk-free way for these (mostly mature) students to undertake a one year course in accounting. This programme would replace the existing Level 6 Graduate Diploma course which was no longer fit for purpose in the current market and for which numbers had diminished in recent years. The market demanded a Level 7 Postgraduate Diploma and it also allowed students to be eligible to apply for funding.

In relation to how this course was stepping up from Level 6 to 7, the Team advised that governance had been introduced and all assessment was now at Level 7.

The Panel enquired as to any market intelligence in relation to a degree apprenticeship and how this course sat within that environment. The Senior Team advised that they already offered a degree apprenticeship but that this PgDip course was a very attractive option for anyone wishing to move into accounting. An international market was also evident for this course and it linked well for progression onto the Department's existing MSc Advanced Accounting. In respect of professional examinations, from experience of students on the current Graduate Diploma, these students historically tended to outperform their undergraduate counterparts as they were very motivated by their change of career decision. This course also aligned with Ulster's widening participation agenda.

The Panel queried *how* the Team intended to cap numbers at 35 and were advised that the rationale for capping was due to the intensive nature of the course and, from experience on its predecessor, these numbers allowed for a very cohesive student cohort. They would, however, consider resources and demand should the demand increase significantly in the future.

3.3 Staff Research

The Panel enquired how the Department managed the balance of teaching and research for staff. As a Faculty, this was indeed a case of balancing load and the Senior Team informed

the Panel that the UUBS had performed very well in REF in research and impact. Research and teaching were considered at Faculty level in the first instance and then cascaded to Department level. Research activity was considered in terms of teaching load as well as ensuring support for early career researchers. Two research professors also brought a balance.

Research and impact were embedded in the curriculum and this received positive student feedback. This was also further enhanced through extensive industry and professional body involvement and engagement as well as staff's own wealth of knowledge from their own professional and industry practice.

3.4 Staff Resources

The Senior Team confirmed that the current staff/student ratio was 1:32 which they recognised as on the high side but advised that a recruitment drive was current ongoing for these growth areas.

When asked if the Accounting and Law programme was a good use of resource, given the small numbers, the Senior Team informed the Panel that there were synergies with other courses and that it operated very efficiently, as did all the Department's courses.

3.5 Collaboration with School of Law

The Senior Team advised that this course had been running successfully for several years. The Course Director was based in the Department of Finance and Accounting with a dedicated counterpart in the School of Law. The effectiveness of the collaboration was based on good communication and knowledge of the students.

3.6 Assessment Strategy

The Panel sought clarification on the overall assessment strategy, but in particular in relation to the BSc Hons Finance and Investment Management, which was 100% coursework. The Senior Team provided some background on the University's Integrated Curriculum Design Framework which had forced them to look at all assessment across the Faculty. This was carried out within the professional body requirement for 75% examination for accounting courses but with more flexibility on finance provision, whilst ensuring a richness and variety of assessment for both areas.

Staff utilised the full 15 weeks of the semester and the use of a series of class tests was to show progressive learning and ensure that students were where they needed to be at every stage. It also allowed staff to manage large student numbers. The Team confirmed that this would be kept under review going forward.

The Panel noted an issue raised by an external examiner in relation to inconsistent marking, but assurance was provided that this related to one module only and the matter had been appropriately addressed with the relevant member of staff. The Team also advised the Panel that processes were in place in the Department to ensure consistency of assessment and marking including regular staff training sessions, away days, module evaluation reports and a system of second marking. The Faculty was also currently working on developing assessment rubrics for each module as part of the integrated curriculum design framework.

3.7 Plagiarism

The Panel enquired if plagiarism was an issue given the significant amount of coursework. The Senior Team confirmed that robust plagiarism policy and procedures were in place across

the University and that all coursework was submitted electronically via Turnitin. They also adhered to the University's Online Assessment and Feedback Policy. All students were made very aware of all kinds of plagiarism and the policies which were in place.

It was noted that coursework was always authentic so any plagiarism would be immediately evident. Overall, the Department was very proactive in this area and was also currently investigating the use of a Turnitin bolt-on to further strengthen existing processes.

4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a group of eleven students from across all courses and years. During discussions the following was noted.

Student expectations and experience

The Panel asked if the University and course had met their expectations and if any areas had fallen short. Overall feedback was very positive and included the following.

- All students spoke of the excellent support provided by staff who were approachable and accessible and extremely helpful.
- The excellent links with employers and the regular engagement through guest lectures was a key aspect of the courses.
- Co-operation from employers also provided excellent opportunities for students to undertake mock interviews and for provision of placements.
- The courses built up knowledge and skills from the first semester and year 1 provided a solid foundation for the next modules.
- The pathways options were a great opportunity for students to diversify.
- Part-time students who had transferred to full-time had experienced a very smooth and supportive process.
- The employability and skills development modules were also well received.

Suggestions for improvement

- The coverage of technology and development of these skills could be enhanced. Students returning from employment internships or study abroad felt that they could have been better prepared in this area.
- Other ways of assessing could be used, for example simulations, however, students recognised that exams were a professional body requirement and noted that the new revised programmes had already taken this feedback on board.
- That the inclusion of the first year Maths and Statistics module could be reconsidered as students felt that although maths and statistics were important and relevant, this was not the best way for these areas to be covered. The students were aware that this change had possibly already been made for incoming students.
- Additional opportunities would be welcomed to develop Excel and other digital/technology skills which were required for employment.

Assessment

Views were sought on the use of multiple, low weighted assessments.

- Students indicated that this had been discussed at Staff/Student Consultative Committee. Some were of the view that the level of effort did not align with the percentage weighting and that one larger assessment would be welcomed. Others were of the view that this provided a means through which students could see their

progress and provided a means for regular feedback on progress. Small assessments also provided good preparation for the end of year examination.

- Students had no major concerns in relation to clustering of assessments and noted that if this occurred it was as a result of poor individual time management. One minor issue was the number of assessments in final year and that perhaps some of the submission dates could be adjusted.

Placement

- Support for placement was good, however, although due to the nature of some courses, students undertook summer internships as an alternative.
- Work based learning was well supported in terms of sourcing and throughout all stages.
- Many students had already been successful in obtaining a graduate post on completion of their course.
- Ongoing engagement with employers and industry really helped students to be work ready – this engagement was noted as particularly good at Ulster.

Pathways

- Students selected their own chosen pathway with information on career options being provided at an Insight Day, however, students would have preferred more information on the module/course content rather than what the career options would be on completion.

Professional exemptions and module choice

- Some students noted that due to maximising the number of professional exemptions, this limited their module choice and that there were other modules which they would have liked to have studied. The Panel encouraged students not to make academic choices purely on exemptions and that this was an opportunity to broaden their learning; exemptions could always be picked up at a later stage.
- Students were content with the number of available options on the Finance and Investment Management programme.

Why study at Ulster?

- All experiences were very positive.
- The excellent employer links and the opportunities that are on offer as a result.
- The excellent staff support and staff/student relationship which resulted in a very positive and encouraging learning environment.
- Preparation for employment.
- Academic support and hands-on approach.
- Excellent support for international students.

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

5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAMS

5.1 Course Developments

The introduction of the pathways to the BSc Hons Accounting was noted as having been very innovative in the sector. Following on from this, the Panel asked the Course Team to outline what the key highlights would be looking back at the past few years but also going forward.

The Team stated that the key issue had been giving students more choice and flexibility than they would have in other programmes. As a Team, staff worked very hard on career awareness and provided a lot of support to students in this regard.

The Team had consulted extensively with students and industry and this continually informed course development. Collaboration with employers provided excellent opportunities for students to sample careers, to undertake placements and internships but also to develop their employability skills.

5.2 Data analytics and technology

The Panel enquired if the level of technology content was sufficient in today's environment and was advised that the provision provided the foundation and a mind set to prepare students for the workplace. There was also an increased focus on the application of technology which provided a sound underpinning knowledge. There had been two staff appointments in this area which would ensure that students developed the required knowledge and skills.

In relation to future plans, in particular for the Finance and Investment Management programme, the Team explained how technology and data analytics would be covered and this included utilising open source data for simulations. The Team recognised that employers used a number of different packages but were assured through employer consultation that a strong knowledge of Excel would provide students with what was required in an employment setting.

The Department had dedicated data science computer lab - the Financial Innovation Lab – used by finance students and additional data analytics had been introduced into the revised curriculum. Given the ever-changing nature of technology, it was very difficult to embed this into a five year revalidation cycle, however, what the Team was aiming for was to build student confidence in technology and be able to transfer the skills developed into employment. A number of employers were also willing to provide data sets for students to use on their particular package.

5.3 Experiential Learning

The Team advised that Governance, Risk and Ethics was now compulsory on all courses. They explained how this module included a boardroom role-play exercise and project to raise commercial awareness and the ethical and legal implications of different issues. Other examples included accounting and law students having to undertake moots as a compulsory element; and an exercise undertaken at the Royal Courts of Justice.

Experiential and active learning opportunities received very positive student feedback and were an invaluable means through which employability skills could be developed. The quality of graduates along with feedback from employers and professional bodies clearly demonstrated students' level of experiential learning.

5.4 Assessment

The Panel noted that assessment rubrics had not been included but that this was a relatively new requirement in the revalidation process.

The Panel further noted the use of multiple class tests and enquired if any this posed any issues in relation to exam conditions. The Team advised that the only issue was one of having large numbers and for which the group would be split in two and the tests held directly after one another to ensure strict examination conditions.

In relation to the BlackBoard Learn exercise, staff assured the Panel that any cases of collusion would be easily identified but that all steps would be taken to mitigate this in the first instance. For example, using a random bank of questions where students were given different questions and the task was time limited.

The Panel queried the use of a 'dissertation style project' and the fact that its weighting varied between modules. The Team advised that all students were required to undertake this project. The title had come about as a result of the University wide move away from the requirement for a final year dissertation but that this was a project sufficient in size and scope to develop research skills. There were no set criteria for such a project which was the reason for the varied weighting and that it depended very much on the subject. The Team agreed to change how all 'dissertation style projects' would be titled.

The rationale for use of multiple, low weighted assessments was questioned – this had received varied responses during the meeting with students. The Team advised that this varied between modules, however, accounting modules linked to exemptions were required to have 75% based on examination. They further advised that a move away from class tests to more formative assessment was beginning but that a series of class tests provided students to develop and improve their exam technique. Considerable discussion had been undertaken in relation to the use of class tests and from experience the team had found that if the assessment was not included in the coursework mark that students would not do it.

Class tests allowed students to build confidence and gain feedback as well as preparing them well for the final examination. These were very technical subjects with a bank of knowledge which all students needed and that students required this structured approach.

5.5 Research informed curriculum and teaching

The Panel acknowledged the research informed teaching but asked how students were being supported and developed in this area. The Team provided a few examples in the provision where students' research skills were being developed. The curriculum design framework included a concentrated effort in introducing and building research skills from the first semester in year one up to Level 6. This prepared students for their final major project and all students had at least one Master's programme to which they could progress. The largest research piece was in the region of 6,000 words and this was in line with the University's curriculum design principles where the typical assessment load was 2,000 words per 10 credit points. The Team stated that nature of the subjects required students to be concise and the word limit honed this skill.

The Team assured the Panel that students had enough scope within the programmes to develop research skills and nurture a research profile but that this was within the limitations of the set criteria and the need for conciseness which was what the sector required.

5.6 Inclusive learning

The Team provided assurance that they followed all the University requirements in this regard and made all reasonable adjustments. This would be done on a one to one basis with the student.

The widening access agenda was at the core of the Department and part of all activity and external examiner and NSS feedback highlighted the level of support provided to students.

The Panel sought clarification on funding implications for the 4 year (or 5 years with placement) Accounting and Law course and how widening access was managed in that course in particular. The Team advised that peer to peer support was part of this course,

which was very much part of both Schools. The course needed to be four years duration due to professional exemptions as well as it being a qualifying law degree. It had been a very successful programme to date and much hard work is undertaken by both Schools to ensure that this was the case and that students were supported in both areas. They provided clarification that students were eligible for funding for 4 years and that a case could also be made on an individual basis for funding for 5 years. The risks of a 4 year programme were offset by immediate employability on graduation.

When asked, the Team advised of no issues in relation to international or other students articulating with advanced standing to any of the programmes. Historically, all students had integrated very well irrespective of the route of entry.

5.7 Attrition and retention

Entrance requirements were reviewed year on year and maths ability would be assessed after the first maths related module and any additional support requirements identified and put in place. The Team confirmed due to limited resource, it was the intention to use the role of studies advisor more effectively going forward.

5.8 Study Skills

The Team confirmed that study skills were embedded into all modules on all programmes and part of an early assessment required students to reflect on the meeting with their studies advisor. This linkage to assessment ensured that all students engaged with their studies advisor.

It was noted that first year modules had been re-ordered in the revised curriculum to ensure that study skills were introduced early in all programmes. It was further noted that the Maths and Statistics module raised by the students had been replaced with a new module.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the programmes on the following:

- i) The very positive feedback from students in relation to the excellent support provided by staff.
- ii) The relationship and links with employers and the direct engagement embedded throughout all courses.
- iii) The responsiveness to student and employer feedback and the changing needs of the professions as well as clear evidence of continuous improvement.
- iv) The development of employment ready graduates.
- v) The creativity and innovation in curriculum design and assessment as well as the use of experiential learning.
- vi) The pedagogical diversity in the curriculum.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programmes be approved for a period of 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 12 November 2019** 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;

Recommendations

- i) To consider reviewing the language used in the 'dissertation-style project' (section 5.4 refers);
- ii) To continue employer engagement in respect of ongoing review of Big Data and data analytics skills with a view to development of a plan to ensure that these areas continue to be fully developed in the programmes. This could also involve engagement with the professional bodies in relation to the 75% examination requirement in relevant modules (section 5.2 refers);
- iii) To consider more formal assessment of technology skills (sections 4 and 5.2 refer);
- iv) To provide some clarification on any proposed system for the capping of numbers on the Postgraduate Diploma course (section 3.2 refers);
- v) In view of the contrasting views of staff and students, to consider a review of current practice for support and information provision in relation to selection of pathways with an increased focus on content rather than career (section 4 refers).

7 APPRECIATION

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