ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL UNIT: 9B TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES (TESOL)

22 March 2018

PANEL: Professor H Farley, Associate Dean (Education), Ulster University Business School, Ulster University (Chair)
Dr D Cummins, Acting Head of Department of Management, Leadership and Marketing, Ulster University
Mr A McAnallen, Academic and Student Affairs, Students' Union, Ulster University
Dr H Donaghue, Senior Lecturer, English Language Teaching, Sheffield Hallam University
Dr R Kiely, Reader in TESOL Applied Linguistics, University of Southampton

REVALIDATION UNIT
CO-ORDINATOR: Dr B Skinner, School of Education, Ulster University

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs A Guarino, Academic Office, Ulster University

1   INTRODUCTION

The Panel met to consider the following provision within Revalidation Unit 9B TESOL.

MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (FT/PT) (CE)

The MA TESOL is a long established programme at Ulster. It is offered in full- and part-time modes and has Postgraduate Certificate and Postgraduate Diploma exit awards. It comprises five taught modules in the full-time programme and six in the part-time programme with a final 60-credit point Dissertation module at the Master's stage. Teaching practice is a core feature of the programme represented primarily in the full-time programme by a 30-credit point Teaching Practice module, and in the part-time programme, by two 15-credit point modules, Teaching Practice 1 and 2. The teaching practice in modules, 'Teaching Practice' and 'Teaching Practice 1', takes place in Hungary. In the other 15-credit point module, the teaching practice takes place locally. The 30-credit point module has 8 weeks of teaching practice and the two 15-credit point modules, 4 weeks each.

2   DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

- Agenda and programme of the meeting
- Guidelines for revalidation panels
- QAA subject benchmark statement for Master's Degree Characteristics (2015)
- External examiners' reports for the last two years
- Preliminary comments from panel members

- Revalidation documentation

3   MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT AND COURSE TEAM

3.1 Context of Programme

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 (Education) 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). The Team stated that this was a well-established programme, which fits well with the strategic aims and key priorities of the Faculty. The Team highlighted the consistency in student numbers, which were in line with the level of resources available. The Panel was informed that consideration was being given to expanding the programme with a greater focus on international students.

3.2 Staffing and Support for Students

The Panel asked for clarification on the number of staff on the programme and the level of support that would be provided to students, specifically during the Teaching Practice in Hungary. The Team stated that there were two teachers on the programme, Dr Barbara Skinner and Dr Heng Hou. However, other staff members from the School of Education would make a valuable contribution to teaching on the programme. In addition, guest lecturers, for example, academics running language schools, would also be employed. Past students, who are working around the world, would also be invited to share their experience over Skype. They explained that the School had a workload model in place to ensure that work was shared equally and that staff were not overburdened.

In regards to support in Hungary during teaching practice, the Team explained that both teaching staff would travel to Hungary to provide students with guidance and support. They would also work closely with the Hungarian mentors working with the students.

In response to the Panel, the Team stated that the two core teaching staff would act as Studies Advisors for the cohort which would be divided equally between them. Regarding module delivery, Dr Skinner stated that she would be module coordinator for four of the modules and would oversee management of the teaching practice and dissertation modules. Dr Hou would be responsible for the other modules.

3.3 Engagement with Employers

In response to the Panel's query regarding employer links, the Team explained that in this regard, they benefitted from continued links with graduates of the programme who were able to put them in touch with their employers. Links with alumni were maintained through email and Facebook.

3.4 E-learning and Digital Resources

The Team stated that Micro Teaching Technology would be utilised by the use of iPads. They said that they had secured funding to run a pilot for TESOL students whereby students would be able to lease an iPad for the duration of the programme at the end of which, they would have an option of buying the device. Amongst other things, the iPads would be used to record teaching practice to aid future improvement and the dissemination

of good practice. The Team pointed out that e-learning was now embedded throughout programme delivery.

3.5 Marketing and Expansion

The Panel asked whether there were plans for future growth of the programme and how this would be marketed and sustained considering the small size of the current team. The Team pointed out that student numbers were currently consistent and acknowledged that any rise in numbers would require additional resources in the form of both professional and administrative support. They recognised the potential for growth, particularly in the international arena, where currently they were exploring opportunities in China, through Dr Hou's contacts. They pointed out that the School had recently provided £3000 additional funding for marketing purposes and that they had found social media a successful tool for marketing purposes.

The Team stated that currently they conduct most of the recruitment themselves, using their own personal contacts, as opposed to the use of agents. They suggested that for recruitment to be successful on a larger scale, they would require a professional targeted recruitment campaign supported by the International Office. Marketing strategies might include using agents in target markets or utilising Alumni to talk on behalf of the programme on open days and at events around the world. The Panel commended the Team for successfully recruiting international students without the assistance of agents and commented on the need for the Faculty/School to be more involved in this process as part of their strategy for growth.

3.6 Admission

In response to the Panel's query regarding how suitability for teaching would be assessed as an admission criterion, the Team explained that all local applicants would be interviewed. This would involve the completion of one or two tasks related to creativity for example, involving the utilisation of resources. However, international students would not be interviewed as part of the admission process. The Panel felt that there might be a case to consider equalising the admissions process, by also interviewing international students, for example using Skype, as a way of ensuring commitment and a better understanding of the programme.

The Panel suggested that a score of 6.0 in IELTS appeared low for a programme of this type. The Team responded that this had never created a problem and outlined the English support that the University currently provided and the ethos of mutual support and 'togetherness' that was instilled in students, encouraging the integration of home and international students. Experience had taught that the support provided by home students to the international students was key to the development of the language skills of those international students whose first language was not English. It was also pointed out that in the past, some of the best work had been produced by international students. The Team also pointed out that the University had introduced a 'buddy system' in which an international student was paired with a home student for added support and assimilation.

3.7 Course Structure

The Panel enquired about the imbalance in the study load across the first two semesters of the FT programme. The Team explained that the 75/45 credit point split was a result of the 30-credit point Research Methods module being taught over the first two semesters.

The they said that if delivered in semester two only, it would have to be taught intensively in two blocks before and after the 8-week teaching practice placement module taken in semester 2. Student feedback had indicated that they had found this approach too challenging and suggested that they learn more effectively when the module is spread across the two semesters. The Team explained that normally, delivery of the module would begin halfway through semester 1 and taught over the final six weeks. It would then continue into semester 2 leading up to and continuing after the Teaching Practice placement. They pointed out that coursework assessments for the module would be submitted in semester 2 only; coursework 1 before the Teaching Practice placement and coursework 2, afterwards. The Panel did not raise any concerns regarding the Team's approach. The Team were informed that Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC) approval for this approach was required.

The Panel noted that the difference in module sequencing in FT and PT modes resulted in different modules comprising the PgCert exit award. The Panel also highlighted that the PT PgCert exit award totalled only 55 credits (i.e. below the minimum requirement of 60). Following a discussion around possible resolutions, it was suggested that the Team would consider alternative module combinations adding up to 60 credits, while ensuring the modules meet the required learning outcomes.

3.8 Creativity

In response to a Panel query, the Team confirmed that creativity was one of the aims of the programme. For example, in the first module, English Language Teaching Methodology, there would be no reference to the use of course books in teaching during the first six weeks. This period would be devoted to, inter alia, learning how to plan and design lessons, ensuring coherency of lessons and designing their own materials and activities for use in lesson delivery. Only then would the focus change to teaching practice, possible school placement locations and the level that students would be at in those schools. Students would then be introduced to course books which would be expected by the Hungarian schools. However, students' own creativity would be a focus from the outset of the programme and would continue throughout including during teaching practice. Students would be expected to strike a balance between developing and using their own teaching materials and activities and the use of course books. It was pointed out that students would be expected to demonstrate other skills beyond those based solely on the use of course books. The Team acknowledged that students would be required to meet their placement mentor's expectations and there would therefore always be a balance to be struck between those expectations and the use of students' own creativity.

3.9 Assessment Strategy

The Panel noted 13 assessments in the programme and suggested that there might be over-assessment. The Team replied that the number of assessments had already been reduced and pointed out that while there were a total of 13 assessments, a number were small components of a single assessment. They explained that previously, the Teaching Practice portfolio had contained six different components which had now been reduced to two. This approach had been taken to indicate to students where they were getting their marks but they had recognised that this was leading to over-assessment and hence the reduction. The Team opined that the current level of assessment was both desirable and appropriate.

The Panel expressed concern that the practical skills assessment in the Teaching Practice modules would contribute 70% of the overall mark for the module. The Panel felt that to weight so much of the overall result on a single performance at the end of the module might disadvantage students. The Team stated that they had debated their approach to the teaching practice assessment a number of times. One view expressed was that it was unfair to summativity assess students early in the module. Students would however receive formative feedback during this period. They had also considered a 'pass/fail' mark but student feedback had indicated a preference for the current approach. The Team acknowledged that assessing performance was difficult but pointed out that detailed marking criteria would be used and that students would receive a very detailed report on their performance.

The Panel queried the equity in the assessment load of the Teaching Practice modules between FT and PT programmes, noting that the latter had double the assessment load given it had a total of four assessments across two 15-credit point modules as opposed to two in the 30-credit point FT module. The Team explained that all the modules were level 7 modules and that the learning outcomes were similar in all three. The only difference would be the focus on teaching a multilingual group of learners in the Northern Ireland based module as opposed to a monolingual group in Hungary.

In response to a concern raised regarding the Dissertation word count, the Panel pointed out that a word count of 18,000 words did not accord with the University's new Curriculum Design Principles, and suggested a reduction to between 12,000 to 15,000 words.

3.10 Progression

The Panel noted the current abundance of prerequisite and corequisite modules in the programme, querying if a pass in the prerequisite modules would be a progression requirement. Following a discussion, the Team agreed to review the necessity of so many modules being identified as such.

3.11 Student Representatives

In response to a question from the Panel, the Team advised that they would have both a home and an overseas student representative. The Team stated that they had a close relationship with student representatives, meeting with them informally on a regular basis to discuss both issues of concern and good practice. This was in addition to the formal meetings of the Staff/Student Liaison Committee. The Panel commended the relationship between the Team and student representatives.

4   CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the Course Team on the following:

- commitment of the small teaching team
- excellent programme concept embodied in the core curriculum and in how it is carried through to delivery, including the complex learning that takes place on placement.
- core aspects of knowledge, research and reflective practice embedded in the programme
- high level of support provided to students

- teaching practice element, which is a strength of the programme and its unique selling point.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the provision within Revalidation Unit: 9B TESOL be approved for a period of five years (intakes 2018/19 – 2022/23 inclusive) subject to the condition 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

1) that the issues identified in the appendix to the panel report be addressed;

Recommendations

1) review the structure, content and the credit point total of the part-time Postgraduate Certificate exit award;

2) consider reduction of the maximum word count for the Dissertation (suggested 12000 to 15000 words);

3) consider changing the marking of the practical skills assessment in the Teaching Practice modules to 'pass/fail';

4) consider the necessity of retaining references to prerequisite and corequisite modules in module descriptions;

5) as part of the Faculty/School strategy for growth, give thought as to how, and what areas, the programme might be prepared for future growth.

6   APPRECIATION

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

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