

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL FOR UNIT 11 ENGLISH (ug/pg)

23 January 2018

PANEL:

Professor Una McMahon-Beattie, Head of the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Ulster University (Chair)

Dr Shirley Barrett, Lecturer in International Business, Ulster University

Professor Andrew Hadfield, Professor of English, University of Sussex

Professor Peter Kitson, Professor of English, School of Literature Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia

Mr Andrew McAnallen, Vice-President, Students' Union (Coleraine), Ulster University

REVALIDATION UNIT

CO-ORDINATOR: Dr Tim Hancock, Lecturer, School of Arts and Humanities

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs Catherine Avery, Academic Policy and Standards Manager, Academic Office, Ulster University

1. INTRODUCTION

The Panel was convened to consider the following provision:

Undergraduate Honours Subject: English (Single Honours/Major/Main/Minor) (with CertHE and AB exit awards) - Coleraine (Full-time/Part-time) and Main (Level 6 only) at outcentre - Newry campus, Southern Regional College (SRC) (Part-time)

MA English Literature (with PgDip exit award) – Coleraine (Full-time/Part-time)

2. DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation:

Agenda and programme of the meeting

Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels;

QAA subject benchmark statement for English (February 2015);

QAA Characteristics statement: Master's Degree (September 2015);

External examiners' reports for the last two years;

Comments from Main (Level 6) students on their experience at Newry, SRC;

Course submission;

Preliminary comments from Panel members;

Preliminary comments from the Academic Office.

3. MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Panel met with the Associate Dean (Global Engagement), Head of School of Arts and Humanities and the Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator, to discuss how the provision had taken into consideration the University's Five and Fifty Year Strategic Plan, Faculty and School learning strategies and resource matters.

3.1 Strategic Aims

The Senior Team advised that in the revalidation submission they had illustrated that English was a dynamic subject that contributed significantly to the priority areas of academic excellence, civic contribution and global vision. The revised English provision had been designed to meet the 2015 QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for English and to ensure that graduates of the programme would demonstrate the graduate qualities identified by the University. These qualities had also been identified in a recent British Academy report (*The Right Skills*, November 2017), as uniquely cultivated by subjects in the Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences. The Panel noted that KPIs were set at School (not course level) and that the Global Vision priority of international recruitment could not be met by all subject areas. Although the undergraduate programme would not be marketed internationally, the subject of English continued to be popular with exchange students. The Team was confident that international and global values had been embedded within the programme.

3.2 Demand

English continued to meet significant demand for the educational opportunities it offered, although the intake was limited by Maximum Student Number (MASN) legislation. In 2017/18 there were 223 students (across the three years) enrolled for English modules, 120 of whom were registered for the Single Honours degree programme. Although an increase of approximately 10% in the Single Honours intake was projected over the next five years, the number of combined student numbers was declining by a similar amount due to the discontinuation of other subjects and combinations. The five-year MASN projections were difficult to determine but the School hoped to continue to grow the non-MASN areas of the part-time and postgraduate provision. The Team considered that the proposed 10% increase in the student intake would not have a significant impact on the current SSR (approximately 1:20) given the decrease in the number of combined subjects.

The Panel noted that the course attracted many different learners: those from schools on both sides of the border, mature students, students with non-standard academic backgrounds and international students on various exchange programmes. The Team aimed to foster the creative and intellectual potential of these learners, to raise aspirations and to widen horizons. The Panel was impressed with the subject's success in the national Student Survey in the achievement of overall satisfaction scores of 96% in 2016 and 94% in 2017, these figures being significantly above the sector average.

3.3 Staff Resources

Twelve staff were involved in teaching 38 modules. The Team intended to build on aspects of the courses that they were already doing well and to continue to be more innovative and creative in their delivery of the programmes. To ensure that this was achievable in terms of the staff resource available, there had been close liaison between the School and the Research Director to manage staff teaching and research workloads and with a view to ensuring that teaching would be specialist and research-led. English had a strong reputation for the quality and significance of its research. In the 2014 REF 80% of publications and over 60% of the impact of their work on policy and practice was rated between 3* and 4*.

Staff teaching hours were considered comparable to elsewhere and although there were a large number of optional modules on offer, modules core to outreach, employability and compulsory modules would be prioritised. Decisions regarding the number of optional modules made available each semester/year would take into consideration the staff resource available. The Panel was reassured that process of module selection by students would be carefully managed.

There were high staff costs associated with the delivery of the Main subject strand (Level 6) at SRC by two members of Ulster staff. The School recognised the added value in continuing to offer this provision since the Level 6 modules built on the AB degree in English and History, which was validated by Ulster. Satisfactory levels of recruitment at SRC, and other KPIs, would continue to be monitored.

4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a four undergraduate and two postgraduate students studying at Coleraine. As students studying at Newry on a part-time basis were not available to attend in person or join the meeting by Skype, they had provided the Panel with a very detailed report on their experiences at SRC. The comments were very positive and welcomed by the Panel.

Key points raised by the Coleraine students are outlined below.

4.1 Structure and Content

The Panel sought the students' views on the structure and content of their programmes. The students welcomed the flexibility and choice in the modules offered in the undergraduate programme. Although they appreciated the need for some of the compulsory modules, some students were not always interested in the subject matter of these modules or they might have preferred to study another optional module in line with their area of interest. Some students found it difficult to choose their optional modules due to the wide range of modules on offer and as they only received a short paragraph summarising the content of each module. The students suggested that more detailed module information and/or module advice sessions would help them make a better-informed decision.

4.2 Study Abroad

The students received some information about the study abroad opportunities by email and at the start of lectures. Not all students could attend an information session on Study USA because of a clash with lectures. One student had participated in an ERASMUS exchange programme and would have liked more information on the scheme particularly in relation to financial matters. The experience had been very valuable and enjoyable and the student had shared her experience with other year groups to raise awareness of the scheme.

4.3 Assessment

The students expressed concerns regarding the reduction of word limits for assignments in the current academic year and, although staff were sympathetic to their views, they felt that they were not really prepared for this significant change in approach to writing assignments. They felt that the lower word limits made it difficult for them to do justice to their knowledge in the writing of assignments particularly in the subject area of English, which often involved the inclusion of many quotations etc. The students felt unprepared for this change having been used to writing longer assignments in earlier years of study and this change had significant implications for the presentation of dissertations.

4.4 Guest Speakers

The Panel asked the students about the input from alumni or guest speakers to the delivery of the programme. The undergraduate students advised that an excellent range of guest professionals, including alumni, were regularly invited to speak to students in lectures, seminars, workshops and readings. These included authors, journalists and publishers etc. Other activities were organised e.g. a Poetry day. Some students, particularly those on combined studies programmes, were unable to attend some activities due to clashes with

lectures. The MA programme was delivered on two evenings per week, which meant that it could be difficult for these students to attend events held during the day especially for those in employment. More evening events would be welcomed.

4.5 Employability

The students considered that they gained transferable skills, which helped equip them for employment. One student advised that the University's EDGE award had been very beneficial in this regard. One of the Masters students considered that, although the opportunity for students to draw up an essay question had been very challenging, it had been very worthwhile in terms of the development of transferable skills.

4.6 Staff-Student Consultation

The students explained to the Panel that they were able to seek advice from or, raise any matters of concern directly with staff or their course representatives. These arrangements worked well and staff were very responsive in taking action to address any concerns raised. Staff had been very accommodating with regard to issues identified in relation to timetabling and assignment deadlines. In relation to the MA programme, a questionnaire had been designed to seek further feedback. One matter identified was the need for students to gain more experience in giving presentations. The undergraduate students considered that they also lacked experience of presentations and would welcome the opportunity to give presentations in years 1 and 2.

4.7 Student Support

The Panel noted the support available to students through central departments but sought clarification of the support provided by staff within the School/Faculty. The Panel was advised that year tutors and studies advisers were in place. Staff were very welcoming, approachable, helpful and supportive to students whether this be in face-to-face meetings or by email. Students were aware of staff office hours when they would be contactable. One student advised that, in his view, the support from staff could not be improved upon and another considered the support provided at Ulster was significantly better than that experienced at another institution.

One student voiced concern about the lack of information about the new faculty structures and the new Dean and suggested that communication between the Faculty and students could be improved. It was suggested that, since the new Faculty was established, there seemed to be a slightly different atmosphere on the Coleraine campus

5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

5.1 Employability

The Panel asked the Team to clarify their engagement with key stakeholders in their review of the provision. The Team acknowledged that, in the past, there had not been significant engagement with potential employers in relation to the English provision. The Team now recognised the value of engaging with potential employers in meeting the employability agenda and the need to cultivate employability skills. The University's EDORT tool had been used to monitor and review the delivery of employability skills and the Team was committed to developing these skills in students.

The Team considered that Ulster English graduates possessed qualities appropriate to the enhancement of their employment prospects, which was reflected in the DLHE statistics: 6 months after graduation, 88% of graduates were in paid work or further study. The Panel

questioned whether students had secured graduate or professional jobs and noted that some graduates did find employment in a range of professional areas including editing, writing, publishing, journalism, media and the music industry or, undertake further study such as, a PGCE.

5.2 Work-based Learning and Placement

The Panel noted that the Level 4 module 'Genres of Writing' had been running for two years and was compulsory for all students studying English as a Single Honours, Major or Main subject. It featured a placement or work-based learning component in which students engaged (for at least 20 hours) in employment, voluntary/community/caring work or in a leadership role. They were required to produce a report giving examples of how four (from a list of twelve) work-related skills and competencies had been achieved. This component had been designed following consultation with an HR professional in the NHS and provided students with some of the transferable skills useful for job applications.

An optional placement year leading to the award of Diploma in Professional Practice had also been introduced in the programme and would be undertaken in Year 3 of the programme. Although this would be student-led, the Placement Tutor (reporting to the Course Committee) would ensure that meaningful placements were organised. Although the Team's experience in running placements was very limited, it had been very successful to-date, and one student studying English Major with Education Minor was currently undertaking a one-year placement in a primary school. The Team had also trialled a number of summer placements and had the School had strong links with community organisations and the cultural industry e.g. NI Screen, the Hewitt Society and the Verbal Arts Society who were willing to take placement students. The Heritage Officer in Belfast City Council was also very helpful in identifying potential placements in Belfast, Northern Ireland and further afield.

5.3 Study Abroad

Undergraduate students had the opportunity to study abroad for a year in Year 3, taking the 120 credit point module 'English Abroad' which, if successfully completed, would lead to the award of Diploma in International Area Studies. Although the Team liaised with the academic department of the other institution to make arrangements, students still had some choice in the English modules studied.

All students were given the opportunity to take part in University-based exchange programmes linking Ulster University and trusted partners in other European countries, the United States, Canada and elsewhere. This normally involved second-year students spending one or two semesters at the partner institution pursuing a course of study equivalent, in terms of level and credit value, to the modules they would be doing at Ulster University. The Team liaised closely with the other academic department to ensure that the proposed modules were appropriate. Moderation of marks and external marking for work undertaken abroad was conducted according to the rules, regulations and practices of the host institution. Study or work-based training abroad opportunities included ERASMUS+, the International Student Exchange Programme (ISEP), Study USA and Generation UK-China. The Team encouraged students to be more mobile and to avail of the study abroad opportunities.

The Panel sought clarification of the rationale for the introduction of six new Student Exchange modules at level 5, which were all identical in terms of the module title 'Student Exchange', the learning outcomes, content and assessment. These did not appear to be an accurate record of what each student would be studying as part of the exchange since this information would differ for each student. Reassurance was also sought that the learning outcomes associated with the two compulsory Level 5 modules for Single Honours students, would be fully achievable though their studies at another institution. The Team was asked to make

explicit if a student could study abroad for both semesters in Year 2 and, if so, to consider the impact of a future change to the basis of the calculation of degree classifications (to include a contribution from Level 5) might have in this regard.

5.4 Course Structure

5.4.1 Single Honours, Major, Main and Minor: English

Given that students would have the option to undertake a placement or study abroad year, the Panel advised that, the programme should be presented as a four-year, full-time programme with an optional placement (DPP) or study abroad (DIAS) year in year 3. Although the specification narrative describing the structure of the programme indicated that all students would take two compulsory modules at Level 4, the Panel asked that this be revised to reflect the inclusion of the 'Genres of Writing' module, which was also to be compulsory for Single Honours, Major and Main students.

In modular programmes at Ulster, students were expected to take six modules in their subject for single honours, four for the Major strand, three for the Main strand and two for the Minor subjects, at each level. Greater flexibility could be built into Level 4 to facilitate delayed choice and informed choice by allowing students to select up to three subjects at that level. The Panel sought clarification of the rationale for the proposal that Single Honours students would have the option of taking only three compulsory modules at Level 4 with the remaining modules selected from another subject e.g. Education, History, Journalism and Media Studies. The Panel advised that the number of English modules studies at Level 4 would have implications for the title of the CertHE exit award should the majority of their studies not be in the subject of English. In addition, the Team was asked to consider whether a requirement to study more English modules at Level 4 might provide students with a better foundation in preparation for their Level 5 studies (which might contribute to their degree classification in the future) and since some students might also choose to participate in an exchange programme in Year 2 (Level 5).

The Team advised that approximately 90% of Single Honours students studied six English modules at Level 4 but agreed to consider the high level of choice from other subjects. The Panel asked the Team to review the description of the course structure in terms of the compulsory and optional modules available for each subject strand to ensure that this corresponded with the status of modules in the structure tables.

The structure of the part-time programme required review to show a typical six-year programme of study with a more balanced study workload in terms of the modules offered in each semester and in each year.

The Panel questioned whether all the optional modules would be viable given the large number available and sought clarification of how the choice of modules would be managed. The Team considered that the offering of a broad range of modules was important (in line with the Subject Benchmark) and aimed to offer five options per semester at Levels 5 and 6. The Team did find it challenging to manage the availability of the options since some modules were more popular than others which, had implications for staff workloads. A wide range of options was attractive to applicants to the programme however, the Panel the need to ensure that student expectations were met and to avoid disappointed should options not be made available in a particular semester/year. The Panel advised the Team that the students had suggested that more detailed module information and an options fair, in advance of their selection of options, would be very useful to help them make a more informed choice.

The Team explained that there were a number of informal strands or pathways (without prerequisite modules) e.g., Beckett and creative writing at each level and agreed to make this

more explicit in the documentation. The Panel advised that it would be important to ensure that students would not have the opportunity re-use previously completed assignments for different modules on the programme.

The Team agreed to give further consideration to whether the removal of four compulsory modules at Levels 5 and 6 would have an impact on Single Honours and Major students wishing to progress to a PGCE in English.

5.4.2 Main (Level 6) at Newry, SRC (Part-time)

The Panel noted that SRC students on the BA Hons English and History would take three English modules at Level 6. Students could complete a dissertation in English, as their third English module or, undertake a History dissertation as part of their History Main subject. The Panel noted that broad survey modules were offered at SRC, which differed from the specialist research-led modules offered at Coleraine. The content of the modules offered at SRC built on the Level 4 and 5 content of the AB English and History programme delivered by SRC staff but validated by Ulster University.

5.4.3 MA English Literature

For the MA award students would be required to complete four compulsory 30-credit point modules and a 60-point Dissertation/Creative Project module. A student could choose to exit the programme after successful completion of four 30-credit point modules with an exit award of Postgraduate Diploma. Although not a University requirement, the Panel asked if the provision of a Postgraduate Certificate exit award would be appropriate. The Team suggested that it might be difficult to develop a coherent set of outcomes for a PGC exit award and that it was not really needed since no students had chosen to leave the course early.

The Panel noted that the Dissertation/Creative Project had been presented as a single module but considered that it should be presented as two optional modules (students having to choose one) since the learning outcomes, content, teaching and assessment approaches differed. The Team agreed with this approach.

5.5 Learning Outcomes

The Panel noted that, in the undergraduate programme, all learning outcomes appeared to be developed and assessed in every module, at every level. The Team was asked to review this unusual approach and should to try to differentiate where different outcomes are assessed.

The Panel also asked that the wording of the outcomes for the MA programme be reviewed to ensure that these were written at Masters level and to ensure that they would all be achievable regardless of whether students choose to undertake a Dissertation or the Creative Project.

5.6 Assessment

5.6.1 Turnitin

The Panel noted that in line with University policy, English as a subject now received all coursework – with the exception of some portfolio work in the creative writing modules – electronically via the Turnitin system or Blackboard Learn. This year, the Team had also moved to online marking and feedback. The Panel noted the health concerns of some staff in relation to online marking particularly for modules with large numbers of students e.g. 65. An issue with Turnitin was that there was sometimes a difference in the number of words cited by the students with that recorded by Turnitin.

5.6.2 Examinations

The Team advised that the standard length of examinations would now be two hours instead of three, usually for 40% of the mark, which reflected a shift from the summative examination towards more formative and collaborative approaches to learning and assessment.

5.6.3 Coursework

Following discussion at Course Committee, and taking on board feedback from student representatives on the Staff Student Consultative Committee, the subject of English had decided that the standard length for a Level 6 coursework essay would be 2000-3000 words, worth 40-60% of the overall module mark (8-12 credit points). This was shorter than in previous years when it was 3500 words for 50% of the module mark, but a little longer than the 2000 words per 10 credit points recommended in the University's Curriculum Design Principles. Module coordinators followed the 200 word per 10-credit points guideline in semester 1, 2017/18, but there was a clear consensus against it among Level 6 students, many of whom felt it left them unable to do full justice to their final year learning. The teaching Team shared the reservations of the student body. Given the uniquely exploratory and discursive nature of the essay, and the emphasis placed in the English Subject Benchmark on 'breadth and depth of subject knowledge' 'in-depth understanding' and a 'wide-ranging knowledge of the subject' the Team considered that level 6 students would benefit from a little more space in which to exhibit their research and develop their ideas.

The Panel was supportive of the Team's rationale for exceeding the suggested University word limit and acknowledged that this view reflected the feedback received at the meeting with students. The student considered that a 4000 word length for dissertations would be very challenging and they felt slightly unprepared for this change in approach to the writing of assignments. The Panel could appreciate that shorter assignments would reduce staff workloads but recognised the additional challenges faced by students in writing their assignments. The Panel noted that the majority of modules had three (a few had four) assessment components which was not in line with the University's Curriculum Design Principles which expected two pieces of assessment per module. The Team was asked to consider whether a longer essay (4000 words) as a single assessment component might allow students more scope to do full justice to their knowledge; this might also reduce staff and student workloads. The Team was advised that a strong and detailed case would need to be made for the proposed variation from the Curriculum Design Principles justifying the use of more than two pieces of assessment per module and to exceed the 4000 word count per 20 credit point module. This would be considered by the Panel Chair.

The Panel noted that, in response to a suggestion by the external examiner for the MA programme, the Team had introduced the opportunity, in a number of modules, for students to construct their own essay question. More information was sought on how many modules this involved and how this would be managed by academic staff. The Panel was assured that appropriate arrangements were in place to ensure that the questions set were comparable to the other questions set and to manage this process.

5.6.4 Seminars

The Panel noted that oral and interactive tasks formed a significant aspect of the programme, particularly at Level 6, where every module had some element of oral assessment, in order to ensure the practical/professional and transferable skills developed were fully recognised. Seminar participation was assessed in a large number of modules at each level and included activities such as regular and active attendance at seminar, small group work and engagement in projects. The Team advised that the increased use of seminar participation as an

assessment tool had had a positive effect upon attendance. This assessment component normally constituted 5-10% of the overall module mark.

The Panel acknowledged the positive effect the Team's approach to seminars had in relation to improving student attendance. Reassurance was sought that students would not receive marks for attendance (or loose marks for non-attendance) and the Panel considered that the marking scheme should focus on engagement and contributions etc. Whilst recognising that not many students failed this component, the Panel considered that a case should be submitted setting out the assessment arrangements, the rationale for this approach and to provide clarification of how a student could re-take this assessment component and moderation arrangements. A number of seminars included the requirement for students to submit papers. The Panel considered that more information should be provided with regard to the number of papers to be submitted, the nature of the assessment (formative/summative), whether the word count of the papers were included within the overall word count for the module(s) and how possible over-assessment might be avoided.

5.6.5 Presentations and Podcasts

The Panel welcomed more innovative assessment methods such as the use of presentations and podcasts and noted the Team's intentions to make more use of these should they prove to be a successful and appropriate assessment tool. The Team noted that student group had indicated that they would welcome more opportunity to give presentations earlier in their studies.

5.6.6 Group work

The Team explained that they had substantial experience in teaching students from a diverse range of backgrounds and appropriate induction and Year Tutors were in place to help student transition. Careful consideration was given to the composition of groups with a view to ensure that each group included a mix of backgrounds etc. More information on the assessment of group work needed to be included in the module descriptions to clarify that the weighting of individual contribution is in line with the University's group work policy.

5.6.7 Assessment Schedule

The Panel noted that the Team aimed to stagger assessment deadlines and this had worked well and was appreciated by students. The use of Turnitin to submit assignments online added flexibility for students in the submission of their assignments, rather than having to submit these for example, during School Office hours.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the team on the following:

- a wide range of course that serve student needs and desires, challenge them and making them learn;
- staff are student focussed, approachable and open;
- a comprehensive, engaging and well organised document in line with the benchmarking statement for English and the University's 5 & 50 objectives;
- a good range of teaching and assessment methods indicated in the submission, including active learning;
- clear evidence of research-led teaching;
- peer mentoring scheme; serious efforts to embed employability within the syllabus and the use of placements for this purpose;

- use of Blackboard Learn and e-learning;
- community engagement.

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 2018/19 to 2022/23 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 23 March 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, including a number of issues raised by the Panel, are addressed (Appendix);
- ii) that the undergraduate modular programme be presented as a four-year programme with an optional DIAS and DPP (DPPI) year (section 5.3 refers);
- iii) that the assessment strategy be reviewed in line with the Curriculum Design principles and that the Team should make the case for a slight increase in the word count in line with subject needs and for more than two assessment items in modules (section 5.6.3 refers);
- iv) that in line with Ulster policy with regard to not marking of attendance, the Team should review the assessment of student engagement in seminars and review/clarify the opportunity for re-assessment (section 5.6.4 refers);
- v) that the Knowledge programme learning outcomes on the Masters programme be reviewed to ensure that these are written at Masters level (section 5.5 refers);
- vi) that the programme learning outcomes of the modular programme be reviewed to clarify that the same outcomes are not assessed in all modules at all levels (section 5.5 refers);
- vii) that that the Dissertation/Creative Project on the Masters programme be split into two modules (students must select one (section 5.4.3 refers);
- viii) that the Faculty liaise with the Academic Office regarding the purpose of the six proposed Student Exchange modules and the equivalence of the student exchange modules to the level 5 modules on the degree programme particularly in relation to the two compulsory Level 5 modules (section 5.3 refers).

Recommendations

- i) that clear structure diagrams be presented;
- ii) that the number of compulsory modules at Level 4 in the Single Honours subject strand be given further consideration together with the appropriateness of the title of the CertHE in English exit award. (If proposed, a separate case would need to be made to ASQEC for a title that differs from the parent programme) (section 5.4 refers);
- iii) that the Team should consider more strategically the support for students in terms of employability including the placement year and the work-based learning components and consider further the promotion of the year 3 placement and study abroad opportunities for students (section 4.2 refers);

iv) that clarification be provided of how students are guided in relation to their module choice and the informal pathways of study that exist within the programme (section 4.1 refers);

v) that consideration be given how to prepare students for oral presentations and how this is embedded effectively within the teaching, learning and assessment strategy (sections 4.5, 5.6.5 refer).

7 APPRECIATION

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

