

**UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

**Academic Standards Committee - Friday 30 May 2008**

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:  
Report of the Review of Theology and Religious Studies held on 5  
March 2008**

**Mrs Ruth Cole, Clerk to the Review Panel**

**May 2008**

**Review Panel:**

Professor John Coggins	Vice-Principal (Life Science, Medicine & Veterinary Medicine), Convener
Professor Gavin Flood	Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, University of Oxford, External Subject Specialist
Professor Nigel Yates	University of Wales (Lampeter), External Subject Specialist
Mr Anders Aufderhorst-Roberts	Student Representative
Professor Jeremy Smith	Department of English Language, Cognate Department
Professor Keith Millar	Senate Assessor on Court
Dr Jane MacKenzie	Learning and Teaching Centre
Mrs Ruth Cole	Senate Office, Clerk to the Review Panel

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow is based in the Faculty of Arts. The teaching of theology has had a long history in the University and over the years the subject areas covered by the present department have been incorporated in various different organisational structures. The Review Panel found the summary of this history given in the Self Evaluation Report (SER) particularly helpful. Today's integrated Theology and Religious Studies Department also incorporates Trinity College (which represents the interest of the current Church of Scotland).
- 1.2 The previous internal review of the Department took place in 2000 and the external subject review by QAA in session 2000-01. The outcome of the latter was that the reviewers had 'confidence' in the academic standards achieved by the Theology and Religious Studies programmes. The quality of teaching and learning, student progression and learning resources were all commendable. At the time of both reviews, what now exists as the Department of Theology and Religious Studies was constituted as the Faculty of Divinity. During the current Review, the Panel was concerned to find that limited progress appeared to have been made in relation to some of the issues highlighted in the former reviews (see paragraphs 4.2, 4.3.4 and 4.8.2 below).

- 1.3 The SER was prepared by Professor Ian Hazlett (Head of Department), Ms Julie Clague (Depute Head of Department) and by other groups charged with drafting particular sections. The full document was circulated to staff and students and finally approved at a Departmental meeting in January 2008. The Panel found that the SER provided a very full account of its activities, and of its strengths and weaknesses. Other documentation available to the Panel provided evidence of strategic thinking, but the Panel concluded that the Department now needed to further develop its strategic vision for the future. (See paragraph 2.8 below.)
- 1.4 During the visit the Review Panel met with Professor Elizabeth Moignard (Dean), Professor Ian Hazlett (Head of Department) and Ms Julie Clague (Depute Head of Department), 12 other members of staff (including 1 probationary member of staff) and 6 Graduate Teaching Assistants, 8 postgraduate students and 9 undergraduate students (who represented all levels of the Department's provision). The Panel found the meetings with staff and students to be stimulating, positive and open, and from these meetings the Panel formed the view of a Department in which there exists a strong shared, though evolving, vision.

## 2 Background Information

- 2.1 The Department has a total of 18 members of staff, of whom 15 are academic. The staff have offices at Numbers 3 and 4 The Square, which is also the administrative base. The Department building accommodates 2 seminar rooms, IT and library facilities and a student common room.

### Staffing

- 2.2 At various points during the Review, four recent appointments were referred to as being of key importance for the future development of the Department. The support of the Faculty in achieving these appointments was acknowledged. In the course of the Review visit, it became evident to the Panel that the recently appointed staff had brought vision and enthusiasm that had been welcomed by the Department. Some staff spoke of turbulent times in the Department in previous years, but felt that there was now momentum and a more positive mood. The undergraduate students who met with the Panel also commented appreciatively on the fact that the Department was able to attract new staff of international renown.
- 2.3 Student numbers for 2006-07 were as follows:

Students	Headcount	FTE
Level 1	463	78.77
Level 2	292	50.11
Level 3	21	8.07
Honours	87	62.40
Undergraduate Total	863	
Postgraduate Taught	34	18.29
Postgraduate Research*	46	

\*(for information only - research is not covered by the Review)

- 2.4 The Review Panel considered the following range of provision offered by the Department.

*Undergraduate programmes*

MA in Theology & Religious Studies (General)

MA in Theology & Religious Studies (Honours)

BD (Ministry) (General) (recognised for Church of Scotland ministry)

BD (Ministry) (Honours) (recognised for Church of Scotland ministry)

BD (General)

BD (Honours)

*Postgraduate Taught Programmes*

MTh (General)

MTh/MLitt in Literature, Theology & the Arts

MTh in Inter-Faith Studies (introduced in 2005)

- 2.5 The Department also contributes to the MA in Philosophical and Theological Education offered by the Faculty of Education, and assists the University in the monitoring of programmes offered by the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, which is one of the University's associated institutions.

**Department vision and strategic plan**

- 2.6 The Review Panel was impressed with the enthusiasm and vision of staff and students. At all of the meetings with staff, there was a strong consensus supporting the twin track of Theology and Religious Studies. The relationship between the two areas was becoming closer, and this philosophy was reflected in the recent appointments. Staff expressed their commitment to the interdisciplinarity within the subject areas that this implied.
- 2.7 The Panel particularly enjoyed discussing the vision of the Department with Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). The discussion focused on the relationship between Theology and Religious Studies, and how areas such as Islamic Theology and Jewish Theology fitted into the structure. The GTAs noted that students appeared to enjoy taking courses from outwith their own programmes and finding linkages with their core studies. The GTAs also spoke of their enthusiasm for being involved in a Department where they felt that the discipline was in a process of redefinition.
- 2.8 In the course of the Review, the Panel formed the view of a Department that delivered a diverse portfolio, where continuing rationalisation of existing provision was required, and where there was potential for many new important developments as well as consolidation of growing areas. Teaching resources were already stretched, and in the coming years key retirements would present new challenges. In this context, the Panel concluded that it was now essential that the Department refined and re-articulated its vision for the future. The Panel **recommends** that the Department produce a comprehensive strategic plan that prioritises its different activities and aspirations, and that this be supported by a business plan and workload model (see paragraph 2.9 below).

## **Workload**

- 2.9 Work was underway in the Department to develop a workload model and staff were engaging with this. At each of the Panel's meetings with staff, the issue of workload was discussed: staff were aware that workload was currently unevenly distributed and some individuals were overstretched. This was also evident from the workload documentation made available to the Panel. The Panel **recommends** that the Department continue its work in developing a robust and comprehensive workload model, in order to promote transparency and equity, and to further encourage staff to see their part in the overall aims and objectives of the Department.

### **3. Overall aims of the Department's provision and how it supports the University Strategic Plan**

The Review Panel **commends** the Department's practice of giving prominence in the student handbooks to its aims. The aims were explicitly linked to the University's Strategic Plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy. This was particularly demonstrated by the Department's strong record on widening access and internationalisation.

### **4. An Evaluation of the Student Learning Experience**

#### *4.1 Aims*

Programme Aims were clearly stated in student handbooks and were in line with Departmental Aims and the Subject Benchmark Statement.

#### *4.2 Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)*

The 2001 QAA review had required revision of the Department's Intended Learning Outcomes. In the Self Evaluation Report, the Department had acknowledged that the current ILOs for many of the Department's courses were still inadequate and did not follow University guidelines. The ILOs for courses currently in development were in line with the requirements. The Head of Department explained that a number of the existing courses had been developed many years ago and that the ILOs had not been updated. Postgraduate students who met with the Panel commented that for courses that were delivered jointly to Honours students, they were not clear what the different learning outcomes and levels of assessment for Honours and Masters were. The Panel **recommends** that in the process of further rationalisation of its portfolio (see paragraphs 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 below) the Department, with assistance from the Learning and Teaching Centre, revise its ILOs to bring them into line with University requirements and ensures that they are readily available to students.

#### *4.3 Assessment, Feedback and Achievement*

##### **Assessment methods**

- 4.3.1 The Review Panel explored the Department's work in broadening its assessment methods. Case studies and book reviews had been introduced on some courses. Such assignments broadened the skills being developed and were also less susceptible to plagiarism. The Department's view was that students liked to have a range of assessment patterns in their chosen courses for various reasons such as avoiding clashes of submission dates and the ability to develop a range of skills. A balance between

summative and formative assessment was also important. Undergraduate students spoke positively about being given a theme rather than a set question for an essay, and being able to discuss this in advance in a tutorial; they said that they had enjoyed being free to choose areas of particular interest to them. In its Self Evaluation Report, the Department had identified oral skills as a particular area needing further development.

- 4.3.2 The undergraduate students who met with the Panel and who were in the process of completing their dissertations said that they had enjoyed being able to study a topic in greater depth, and that the choice of topic was usually made with the help of suggestions from lecturers. They also felt that the dissertation built well on previous essay work and that they received good supervisory support.
- 4.3.3 Undergraduate students who met with the Panel expressed the view that there was potential for making more use of tutorials for assessment. There was a view that in large tutorial groups some students did not prepare well and there was no obligation, and limited opportunity, to contribute. They discussed the fact that the student body was very diverse and therefore they felt that there was the potential for a wide range of experiences and views to be shared in tutorials which would be of benefit to the learning of all. The Panel **recommends** that the Department continue its work in broadening the range of assessment methods, aligning this with the articulation of transferable skills (see paragraph 4.6.1 below).

#### **Feedback on assessment**

- 4.3.4 The 2001 QAA report had raised the issue of delays in providing feedback to students on their assessments. In the 2007 National Student Survey, the Department had again received a poor rating for promptness of feedback on assessment. The Review Panel raised this with the Head of Department who pointed out that the Department of Theology and Religious Studies and the Department of Philosophy had been grouped together in the survey and it was difficult to draw conclusions about the meaning of the data in relation to each Department.
- 4.3.5 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel reported a mix of views in relation to feedback on assessments. Some had found it difficult to understand comments that had been handwritten on scripts. However, it was acknowledged that where further clarification of comments had been sought, staff were very willing to provide this. Students also referred to their experience in other departments of receiving detailed information on what was required to attain the highest grades, and suggested that this would be helpful in Theology and Religious Studies.
- 4.3.6 Postgraduate students who met with the Panel reported that feedback on assessments was slow to arrive. Examples were cited of work having been submitted in November but not returned by the time of the Review visit. This lack of promptness was also noted by undergraduate students who expressed frustration at receiving feedback from assessments a matter of days before the examination. Some of the feedback had lacked detail and gave no guidance on the grade to be awarded. A lack of feedback appeared to be a common experience amongst the group of postgraduate students who met with the Panel. The Panel enquired whether this impacted on the students' ability to complete the postgraduate dissertation, but most felt that they had had adequate guidance for this. Former postgraduate students who were currently studying for a PhD stated that they had received no feedback on their Masters dissertation, and that such feedback would have been very helpful as they embarked on their research.
- 4.3.7 The Panel was very concerned about the issues relating to late or missing feedback raised by the students at the review meetings, and considered it to be unacceptable that some students did not know when feedback would be received. (The Panel noted that the review documentation did not indicate any formal student dissatisfaction with regard to the punctuality or substance of feedback on assessment.) Department staff

advised the Panel that an agreed timescale of four weeks for the return of undergraduate work was advertised in the Handbooks, and that a longer return period for postgraduate coursework arose from work being double marked internally and assessed by external examiners. The Panel **recommends** that the Department review its practice in relation to the provision of feedback, communicating agreed timescales to all involved in the process, with active monitoring to ensure that punctual feedback is adhered to, so that students can be confident in their expectation of timely and constructive feedback, which forms an integral part of the learning process.

#### 4.4 *Curriculum Design, Development and Content*

##### **Undergraduate curriculum**

- 4.4.1 The Review Panel noted that there was a very large number of courses available at Honours level and that some ran with low students numbers. The Department had done much to rationalise the provision of courses at levels 1, 2 and 3 and recognised in its SER that work was still needed at Honours level. Traditionally, each Honours course had been taught by one member of staff but the Department was now increasing team-taught delivery, with 2 or possibly 3 individuals involved with each course. Staff appointments were now made with this policy in mind. The Panel **commends** this approach and **recommends** that in forward planning and recruitment the Department seek to ensure that each staff member has at least one colleague whose areas of expertise overlap with her/his own to offer support in teaching and assessment.

##### **Postgraduate curriculum**

- 4.4.2 The issue of a large number of courses running with small student numbers also applied to postgraduate taught programmes. The Head of Department explained that the Department was in the process of rationalising the portfolio, and that the current situation reflected a long history of many different courses having been presented over the years. Again, the Department was working towards team-taught delivery. The Panel endorses this work and **recommends** that the rationalisation be pursued as a matter of priority.
- 4.4.3 At Masters level, the Department was aware of the need to cater for students who wished to progress on to undertake research, as well as for those who were studying to gain more qualifications and a more in-depth knowledge. Departmental staff reported a significant demand from graduates (clergy, chaplains, teachers) who were looking for CPD-type provision. The Panel **recommends** that the Department explore CPD courses for clergy, chaplains and teachers as a niche area with potential for further exploitation.
- 4.4.4 The Panel noted that the Department now had an established pathway through from undergraduate, to taught Masters and then PhD, and further Masters programmes were in development to strengthen this coherence. This emphasised the importance of incorporating into the Masters programmes training for research. Such skills should be woven into the Department's strategy on transferable skills (see paragraph 4.6.1). The Panel was pleased to meet with students who had successfully progressed through these stages in the Department and who spoke very positively of their experiences.

##### **Practical skills**

- 4.4.5 The Department's curriculum had to balance the provision of vocational and more academic studies. There were fairly rigid requirements associated with the BD (Min) and the Department was obliged to fulfil these. Undergraduate students who met with the Panel expressed the view that, in the past, there had been a lack of practical courses for ministerial candidates but that this had been addressed by a recent appointment and the introduction of new courses. There was also a comment from an undergraduate student that the placements were very effective for the development of practical skills

and, on the whole, undergraduate students on the BD (Min) programme felt that there was a good balance between the academic and more practical side.

#### **Language provision**

- 4.4.6 One external member of the Review Panel raised the issue of how language provision could be expanded. Department staff indicated that there had been recent discussion at a staff–student liaison committee regarding the possibility of increasing the credit rating of language courses. In particular there was an acknowledgment of the importance of Biblical language skills for students progressing on to research. Undergraduate students discussed the issue of language provision: they felt that currently the timetable, together with credit ratings of courses, did not encourage the study of languages. Those students who had studied languages felt this had been of great benefit to their studies. The Department had also identified the reinstatement of Arabic as a priority. The Panel **recommends** that the Department consider how best to facilitate language provision for its students.

#### **Ecumenical developments**

- 4.4.7 The Department’s relationship with the Church of Scotland was at the core of its teaching provision. However, the Review Panel also explored with staff the possibility of reinforcing or establishing partnerships with other Churches. The Panel considered that there was potential for adapting programmes of ministerial and post-ordination training to the needs of other Churches, such as the Scottish Episcopal Church. The Panel **recommends** that the Department consider further how taught provision might cater more for the specific requirements of various other Churches and religious communities.

#### **Potential for linkage with other departments and faculties**

- 4.4.8 One external Panel member pointed out that, when compared to other main Scottish Departments, Glasgow appeared to be understaffed and imbalanced in the areas of Religious Studies and Church History. This raised the question of whether the Department was capable of delivering its existing broad portfolio as well as its aspirations for the future without a significant expansion of staff or whether it should be looking to increase its collaborations with other departments and faculties. It was noted that as the field was becoming more specialised there were fewer generalists flexible enough to cover areas of shortage in the Department.
- 4.4.9 The Review Panel explored the potential for the Department to work more closely with other departments and faculties in the University. Staff from other departments might be able to assist with the delivery of some of the Department’s core courses where staff were currently overstretched (e.g. expertise on Church History might be found within the History Department). Other areas of possible collaboration were with the Centre for Religious Education, Anthropology, Sociology, Law and Medicine. Some of these possible collaborations offered the potential for attracting external funding. Such collaboration would have to be administered formally to ensure its sustainability.
- 4.4.10A view was expressed by staff that, administratively, the University did not promote inter-disciplinarity. It is recognised that inter-faculty and inter-departmental collaboration pose difficulties but the Panel **recommends** that the Department and the Dean pursue the opportunities that have been identified. The Panel suggests that it might be appropriate to convene a committee at faculty level to develop such areas.

#### **4.5 Student Recruitment**

- 4.5.1 The Review Panel noted the Department’s history of success in recruiting students from non-traditional backgrounds. Staff expressed the view that, since the centralisation of admissions, some of the non-traditional applicants had not been

targeted so effectively. The Department's own recruitment activity had declined in the last few years, but there was a willingness to revive this. Documentation provided to the Panel indicated that a Recruitment and Publicity Committee had been set up within the Department but that it had not yet met; at the Review visit, the Head of Department confirmed that this would be a priority for the remainder of session 2007-08. The Panel's view was that a coordinated faculty approach was needed, including the provision of funding to support staff attendance at events. The scope for raising the profile of the Department and the Faculty through the web and the press office should also be considered. While there was currently no difficulty for the Department in meeting its recruitment targets, there was no room for complacency: it was desirable to be able to select from the highest calibre of applicants and to be able to maintain or improve the Department's position in a competitive market. The Panel **recommends** that the Department take this work forward in liaison with the Dean to develop a sustainable strategy on recruitment.

#### 4.6 *Student Progression, Retention and Support*

##### **Employability**

4.6.1 In its Self Evaluation Report, the Department had acknowledged that it had not yet incorporated PDP explicitly into its curriculum, and stated that work was planned in this regard. The postgraduate students who met with the Panel were unaware of PDP. Currently only the BD (Min) explicitly incorporated a vocational element. The Panel **recommends** that the Department, in consultation with the faculty contact in the Learning and Teaching Centre and the Employability Development Officer, take forward its planned work on PDP, employability and transferable skills across the curriculum

#### 4.6.2 *The Quality of Learning Opportunities*

##### **Moodle**

4.7.1 The Review Panel noted that use of Moodle by the Department was very limited. Course materials for only two distance learning courses were published on Moodle. Staff indicated that there was no agreed strategy for the use of Moodle and there was a range of opinion on its usefulness. In student questionnaires there had been no consistent demand for extending its use though the issue had been raised by student representatives at the January Departmental meeting. Some staff expressed interest in using Moodle but did not have time to develop this. Staff acknowledged that there was room for further discussion of the issue and for the Department to explore the range of possible uses of Moodle (such as making material supporting lecture notes available, discussion forums and general communication with the students). The Department indicated that recent efforts had been channelled into developing use of the web and that Moodle would be a next step. There was a view that one area where Moodle would be appreciated was in supporting Level 1 courses which covered a very wide range of subject matter and where class sizes were large. It was acknowledged that development of Moodle would have a workload implication.

4.7.2 Undergraduate students who met with the Panel also discussed the Department's limited use of Moodle and compared this unfavourably with what they had experienced in other departments. They felt that there was a view amongst staff that availability of materials on Moodle would undermine lecture attendance but they (the students) disputed this, expressing the view that materials on Moodle could complement what was given at lectures. It was pointed out that lecture attendance on some courses was poor despite nothing being available on Moodle. It was noted that occasionally it was unavoidable that students missed lectures (especially as the Department had many mature students who had commitments outwith their studies) and in those cases having some materials available on Moodle would be invaluable. The Panel **recommends** that



the Department develop its use of Moodle, seeking input and support from students, the Learning and Teaching Centre and the Faculty.

#### 4.8 *Resources for Learning and Teaching*

##### **Staffing**

- 4.8.1 The pressing need for additional staffing particularly for Religious Studies and Inter-faith Studies was well documented. The postgraduate students who met with the Panel spoke highly of the Centre for Interfaith Studies but commented on the need for an additional member of staff. Graduate Teaching Assistants also commented that the potential for growth in this area was hindered by the current staffing situation. The Panel was interested to learn that the Scottish Executive was in the process of drafting a national Inter-Faith Strategy. In this context, the Department's Centre for Inter-Faith Studies and its taught Masters in Inter-Faith Studies were likely to take on a new prominence, which would add further weight to the case for additional staffing.

##### **Graduate Teaching Assistants**

- 4.8.2 The 2000 internal review of the Department had recommended the adoption of formal procedures for the appointment and support of Graduate Teaching Assistants. The GTAs that the Panel met with spoke of a mixed experience in terms of the training and support that they received. Some had not attended the statutory training delivered by the Learning and Teaching Centre. They reported that course conveners had offered differing levels of support and in some cases the GTAs felt they could have been better prepared and been given more guidance on what had already been covered in lectures. However, all the GTAs appeared to appreciate having been given the opportunity to undertake this work: they found it enjoyable and considered it was valuable for their career aspirations. It was reported that more formal training was being developed in the Department and it was hoped that by next session a full programme would be in operation. A more formal system for appointing GTAs was being developed by the Departmental Teaching Committee and the Postgraduate Students' Committee; this would be more transparent and would aim to ensure a more even load between GTAs. The Panel **recommends** the implementation of transparent appointment procedures for GTAs, a formal system of support, and robust administration that ensures all students comply with the necessity to complete statutory training. The Panel enjoyed meeting the GTAs who were clearly a strong asset for the Department and were fully engaged with its mission.

##### **Probationary Staff**

- 4.8.3 The Panel met with one member of probationary staff, who spoke very positively about the support available in the Department, and felt that the teaching load was fair and allowed time for research.

##### **Postgraduate Convener**

- 4.8.4 During the course of the Review visit, various issues arose in relation to postgraduate provision (portfolio [paragraph 4.4.2], future developments [4.4.3], assessment and feedback [4.3], cancellation of classes [6.7]), and the Panel considered that there would be benefit in one member of staff taking an overview of provision for all postgraduate taught programmes. The Panel therefore **recommends** that the Postgraduate Taught Convener in liaison with the Teaching Committee oversee more closely the management and operation of all aspects of taught postgraduate provision.

## 5. Maintaining the Standards of Awards

- 5.1 The Panel considered the documentation provided regarding alignment with the benchmark statement, the work of External Examiners, assessment procedures and Annual Monitoring Reports. The Panel was satisfied that there were no issues to highlight regarding these areas. Comments regarding the role of the Department's Quality Assurance Officer are given at paragraph 6.2.2 below.

## 6. Assuring and Enhancing the Quality of the Students' Learning Experience

### 6.1 *Student representation*

- 6.1.1 The Department had three student representative bodies: the Divinity Students' Council (DSC); the Candidates' Association; and the Postgraduate Students' Council, the latter having come into being in the current academic session. The Panel was interested to learn about the functions of the three bodies and how they inter-related. The Head of Department explained that all three had representative and social functions, that there was some overlap in membership and that all three were very active. The undergraduate students confirmed that they did not see the representative bodies as rivalling the Students' Representative Council. They described the DSC as having more of an emphasis on social and welfare activities, though it also had a representative at Departmental meetings.
- 6.1.2 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel spoke positively about the common room, which was open to all students, and felt that it was particularly useful for new students to have a base in the Department. The DSC was planning the provision of lockers and refreshment facilities in the common room. The DSC also arranged informal social events for students and staff and other events such as a chapel service. However, some undergraduate students who met with the Panel did not realise that the common room was open to everyone in the Department, and there was a feeling that it tended to be the mature students who used it. Being a small room, there was also a limit to the number of people who could use it at any one time. The DSC was intending to produce a welcome booklet for all new students in the Department clarifying the role of the different student bodies and explaining the facilities available.
- 6.1.3 The postgraduate students who met with the Review Panel spoke about how, with smaller groups at postgraduate level, it was more difficult to get to know many people in the Department. This was particularly the case for Erasmus students who were at Glasgow for a maximum of one year. It was hoped that the recently formed Departmental Postgraduate Students' Committee would improve this situation.
- 6.1.4 The Panel explored with students the way in which the different student bodies related to each other. The undergraduate students felt that while the different groups represented different students, there was a common desire that they should not become cliques, some students were active in more than one of the bodies, and some events were attended by non-members. The Panel was impressed with the enthusiasm and commitment of the students and their active involvement in the wider activities of the Department. The arrangements were to be **commended** for their effectiveness at integrating and supporting the students.

### 6.2 *Course Monitoring*

- 6.2.1 The Review Panel had studied the documentation provided by the Department in relation to annual monitoring. There were many undergraduate Annual Course Monitoring Report forms but no coordination of the reports at programme level.

Documentation available to the Panel indicated that the course monitoring process recorded very little information on feedback provided by students. There was also little evidence of engagement with the enhancement aspect of monitoring. The Head of Department commented on the difficulty of obtaining student returns and a sense that students felt overburdened with QA activity such as the completion of questionnaires. The Panel **recommends** that the Department adopt a more rigorous practice in relation to annual monitoring at course and programme level, involving the Quality Assurance Officer, and that the Learning and Teaching Centre be asked to advise on improving the instruments being used to obtain student feedback.

6.2.2 The Panel also **recommends** that the Department's Quality Assurance Officer be a member of staff whose workload can accommodate the amount of work necessary to carry out the role effectively.

#### **Staff–Student Liaison Committee**

6.3 Staff–Student Liaison Committee minutes indicated that this was not a particularly vibrant forum. The low number of student representatives present meant that there was often more input from staff than from students. There was no evidence of continuity of business between meetings. The Panel considered that this was an area for development, to review whether students were attending the SRC training, and whether there were mechanisms for feeding back to students the outcome of issues discussed at meetings. There was currently no postgraduate staff–student liaison committee. The Panel **recommends** that a Postgraduate staff–student liaison committee be introduced, and that its remit be developed in conjunction with a review of the operation of the undergraduate staff–student liaison committee.

#### **Student feedback**

6.4 The Panel explored the possible reasons for the limited nature of student feedback through annual monitoring and through the staff–student committee. The students who met with the Panel were articulate and well informed and, while generally very positive about their experiences in the Department, raised issues that might have been expected to have been revealed by on-going monitoring in the Department. Many of the students in the Department were mature with extensive commitments beyond their studies. It was possible that these students were more likely to 'take things in their stride' rather than raising issues with the Department. On the other hand, the Panel formed the view, which was supported by staff comment, of the undergraduate and postgraduate students being articulate and confident in raising issues. It was considered likely therefore that most issues were dealt with on an ad hoc basis or through the three student representative bodies. However, the Panel would encourage the Department to maintain formal opportunities or routes for recording and monitoring feedback from students through questionnaires, staff–student liaison committees and annual monitoring.

#### **Support**

6.5 The undergraduate and postgraduate students that the Panel met with expressed the view that, on the whole, academic and administrative staff in the Department were supportive and approachable. Some staff kept specified office hours and some had an open door policy.

#### **Advisers of Studies**

6.6 Undergraduate students who met with the Review Panel felt that contact with their Advisers of Studies was very helpful. However, an instance was reported of an Adviser of Studies having been on holiday in the first week of term when advice was needed. Postgraduate students had an Adviser of Studies outwith the Department, and they

reported difficulties making contact. They felt that Advisers of Studies were to be contacted as a 'last resort' rather than as a regular source of advice. Two overseas postgraduate students also reported having had difficulties resolving issues before arriving at the University, though as soon as they arrived on campus advice was easy to access.

### **Communication**

- 6.7 The postgraduate students who met with the Panel felt that communication within the Department was not always satisfactory, that sometimes information came late and classes would be cancelled at short notice, with a note being left on a classroom door rather than students being notified by e-mail or on Moodle. One postgraduate student commented that the number of cancelled classes seemed high: it was estimated that in the region of 9 or 10 classes had been cancelled at short notice over the 2-year period. The Panel **recommends** that the Department monitor the level of cancelled classes and improve its practice for communicating changes to timetabled classes.

## **7 Summary of Perceived Strengths and Areas for Improvement in Learning and Teaching**

### *Key strengths*

- Optimistic and shared vision amongst staff for the continuing development of the Department
- Broad portfolio of courses covering the twin track of Theology and Religious Studies, with an established pathway from undergraduate to Masters and PhD
- Established record of widening access
- Active engagement and organisational strength of the student community
- Enthusiastic team of Graduate Teaching Assistants
- Academic and administrative staff committed to supporting students
- Welcoming ambience of Department, including provision of student common room
- Continuing positive links with the Church of Scotland through Trinity College that significantly enhance Departmental and Library resources.

### *Areas to be improved or enhanced*

- The development of a Departmental Strategic Plan
- Development, implementation and monitoring of a workload model
- Redrafting of Intended Learning Outcomes
- Rationalisation of Honours and postgraduate taught provision
- Incorporation of PDP/Employability throughout the curriculum
- Feedback on assessment
- Promotion of engagement with QA activity by staff and students
- Implementation of formal procedures for GTA appointment and support
- Department and faculty coordinated activity on student recruitment

- Rich potential for collaborative developments across the Faculty and University

### ***Conclusions and recommendations***

The Review Panel concluded that the Department's provision was of a high quality and it was impressed by the evident enthusiasm and commitment of staff and students. The Panel commends the Department's awareness of its areas of weakness and the fact that work was underway to resolve outstanding issues. However, the Panel wishes to emphasise the importance of seeing this work through to completion, particularly in areas highlighted in previous reviews, such as the support and administration of Graduate Teaching Assistants and the redrafting of Intended Learning Outcomes.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report are summarised below. It is important to note that the majority of these recommendations refer to tasks or issues identified by the Department for action either prior to the Review or in the SER.

The recommendations have been cross-referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer. They are ranked in order of priority.

#### *Recommendation 1:*

The Panel recommends that the Department produce a comprehensive strategic plan that prioritises its different activities and aspirations, and that this be supported by a business plan and workload model.

*[paragraph 2.8]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

#### *Recommendation 2:*

The Panel recommends that the Department continue its work in developing a robust and comprehensive workload model, in order to promote transparency and equity, and to further encourage staff to see their part in the overall aims and objectives of the Department.

*[paragraph 2.9]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

#### *Recommendation 3:*

The Panel recommends that the Department's work on rationalising courses at honours and postgraduate level be completed.

*[paragraph 4.4.1 and 4.4.2]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

#### *Recommendation 4:*

The Panel recommends that the Department revise its practice in relation to the provision of feedback, with agreed timescales being communicated to all involved in the process, with active monitoring to ensure that punctual feedback is adhered to, so that students can be confident in their expectation of timely and constructive feedback, which forms an integral part of the learning process on the course.

*[paragraph 4.3.7]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 5:*

The Panel recommends that the Department, with assistance from the Learning and Teaching Centre, revise its Intended Learning Outcomes to bring them into line with University requirements and ensure that they are readily available to students.

*[paragraph 4.2]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 6:*

The Panel recommends the implementation of transparent appointment procedures for Graduate Teaching Assistants, a formal system of support, and robust administration that ensures all students comply with the necessity to complete statutory training.

*[paragraph 4.8.2]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 7:*

The Panel recommends that the Department, in consultation with the faculty contact in the Learning and Teaching Centre, take forward its planned work on PDP, employability and transferable skills across the curriculum.

*[paragraph 4.6.1]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 8:*

The Panel recommends that the Department continue its work in broadening the range of assessment methods, aligning this with the articulation of transferable skills.

*[paragraph 4.3.3]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 9:*

The Panel recommends that the Department adopt a more rigorous practice in relation to annual monitoring at course and programme level, involving the Quality Assurance Officer, and that the Learning and Teaching Centre be asked to advise on improving the instruments being used to obtain student feedback.

*[paragraph 6.2.1]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 10:*

The Panel recommends that the Department's Quality Assurance Officer be a member of staff whose workload can accommodate the amount of work necessary to carry out the role effectively.

*[paragraph 6.2.2]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 11:*

The Panel recommends that the Postgraduate Taught Convener in liaison with the Teaching Committee oversee more closely the management and operation of all aspects of taught postgraduate provision.

*[paragraph 4.8.4]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 12*

The Panel recommends that the Department develop its use of Moodle, seeking input and support from students, the Learning and Teaching Centre and the Faculty.

*[paragraph 4.7]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 13:*

The Panel recommends that the Department monitor the level of cancelled classes and improve its practice for communicating changes to timetabled classes.

*[paragraph 6.7]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 14:*

The Panel recommends that the Department and the Dean pursue opportunities for inter-departmental and inter-faculty collaboration. The Panel suggests convening a committee at faculty level to develop such areas.

*[paragraph 4.4.8–4.4.10]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department and Dean***

*Recommendation 15:*

The Panel recommends that a Postgraduate staff–student liaison committee be introduced, and that its remit be developed in conjunction with a review of the operation of the undergraduate staff–student committee.

*[paragraph 6.3]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 16:*

The Panel recommends that the Department (through its Recruitment and Publicity Committee) and the Dean take forward the work on student recruitment to develop a sustainable strategy on recruitment.

*[paragraph 4.5]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department and Dean***

*Recommendation 17:*

The Panel commends the move towards team-taught courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level, and recommends that in forward planning and recruitment the Department seek to ensure that each staff member has at least one colleague whose areas of expertise overlap with her/his own to offer support in teaching and assessment.

*[paragraph 4.4.1 and 4.4.2]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 18:*

The Panel recommends that the Department explore CPD courses for clergy, chaplains and teachers as a niche area with potential for further exploitation.

*[paragraph 4.4.3]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Recommendation 19:*

The Panel recommends that the Department consider further how taught provision might cater more for the specific requirements of various other Churches and religious communities.

*[paragraph 4.4.7]*

*For the attention of: **Head of Department***

*Prepared by: Janet Fleming, Senate Office*

*Last modified on: Friday 16 May 2008*