

**UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

**Academic Standards Committee – 3 October 2008**

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:  
Report of the Review of Geographical and Earth Sciences held on 8  
February 2008**

**Mrs Jackie McCluskey, Clerk to the Review Panel**

**March 2008**

**Review Panel:**

Professor John Coggins	Vice Principal (Biosciences), Convener
Dr Kate Brodie	University of Manchester, External Subject Specialist
Professor Paul Cloke	University of Exeter, External Subject Specialist
Mr Jamie Wightwick	Students' Representative Council
Professor Mona Siddiqui	Senate Assessor on Court
Professor Kenneth Strain	Department of Physics (Cognate Department)
Dr Mary McCulloch	Learning and Teaching Centre
Mrs Jackie McCluskey	Academic Policy Manager, Senate Office (Clerk to Review Panel)

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences (GES) was formed in August 2005 from the merger of the former Department of Geography and Geomatics with the Division of Earth Sciences. The merger resulted from a process of ever closer co-operation in research and teaching between the two units and was a logical consequence of strategic planning. The Department is based in the Faculty of Physical Sciences, but has significant research and teaching links to five other faculties (Law, Business and Social Sciences; Arts; Biomedical and Life Sciences; Information and Mathematical Sciences; and Engineering).
- 1.2 Geography and Geomatics and the Division of Earth Sciences were reviewed as separate departments in March 2000 and April 2004 respectively. In addition, Geography was subject to external review by the QAA during academic session 2001-02. The external review concluded '*overall confidence*' in the academic standards achieved by the programmes in Geography and '*commended*' the quality of Teaching and Learning; Learning Resources and Student Progression.

- 1.3 The Self Evaluation Report (SER) was completed by Dr Joanne Sharp, the Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment and was subject to a thorough consultation process with staff and students. The full consultative process was supported by the academic staff interviewed who welcomed the opportunity they had been given to participate. The Review Panel **commends** the consultation process and resulting documentation and highlighted it as an example of good practice.
- 1.4 The Review Panel met with the Dean, Professor David Saxon; the Head of Department, Professor Trevor Hoey and the Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment, Dr Joanne Sharp. The Panel also met with 21 members of academic staff; 6 probationary staff; 17 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs); 4 taught postgraduate (PGT) students and 17 undergraduate (UG) students representing all levels of the Department's provision.

## 2. Background Information

The Department has 33 academic staff (31 as of 8<sup>th</sup> February); 11.5 (fte) support/technical staff and 16 research staff. The total number, excluding research staff, is 44.5. It has a single administrative and management structure, and the support staff (administrative, secretarial and technical) have responsibilities across all aspects of research and teaching in the Department. Learning and teaching in the Department is overseen by the Departmental Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (DLTAC) which meets monthly during the teaching year.

Student Numbers for 2007-08 were:

Students	Headcount	
	Geography	Earth Science
Level 1	318	227
Level 2	179	78
Level 3	128	41
Honours	82	27
Undergraduate Total (FTE)	601	
Undergraduate Total (Excluding GIMS) (FTE)	583	
Postgraduate Taught	18	

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

### *Earth Science*

- BSc Single Honours Earth Science
- BSc Designated Earth Science
- BSc Combined Honours Archaeology & Earth Science
- BSc Designated Degree in Archaeology & Earth Science
- BSc Combined Honours Environmental Biogeochemistry
- BSc Designated Degree in Environmental Biogeochemistry

### *Geography*

- BSc, MA and MA (SocSci) Single Honours Geography
- BSc Combined Honours Geography and another science subject
- MA and MA (SocSci) Joint Honours Degree in Geography and another Arts or Social Science subject
- BSc Designated Degree
- MRes in Human Geography

### *Geomatics*

- MSc in Geoinformation Technology and Cartography (GT&C) - (*New in 2007-08*)<sup>1</sup>
- MSc in Geospatial and Mapping Sciences (G&MS) – (*New in 2007-08*)

In 2005, within the context of the University of Glasgow's Future Shape initiative and in consultation with the Faculty and Senate, the decision was taken to close the undergraduate GIMS programme. The final year complete their studies in 2007-08. The two remaining undergraduate programmes remain distinct, but now include some pooling of option courses at Honours Level.

The Department also contributes to many Joint Honours combinations in the LBSS, Arts and Science faculties.

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

- 3.1 The Review Panel noted the Department's aims which were appropriate and closely linked to the University's Strategic Plan and Learning and Teaching Strategy. On the day of the Review, discussions focussed on the Department's aims at programme and course level as set out under 4.1 below.

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

### **4.1 Aims**

- 4.1.1 The Review Panel noted that the Department's courses were closely mapped to and informed by the relevant benchmark statements. In particular the Panel noted the Department's recent introduction of an explicit focus on employability as a direct response to the benchmark statements. This was documented in the SER and discussed with the Head of Department and the academic staff.
- 4.1.2 The Review Panel explored further the Department's aim to integrate enquiry-led learning into their teaching. It was noted that this was achieved through individual and team laboratory and project work, in particular, fieldwork and independent research projects. These are described in more detail in Paragraph 4.4.

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<sup>1</sup> GT & C ran twice in 04-05 and 05-06, and was suspended in 06-07 pending discussion over the future of Geomatics provision. A major restructuring of the programme was approved in 07-08 along with the new MSc (G & MS)

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

- 4.2.1 The Review Panel was pleased to note from its discussions with staff and students that the Department's ILOs were well structured and well received. The Review Panel **commends** the Department's mapping document, widely available via MOODLE, which clearly links the ILOs contained in the Programme Specifications to the learning and teaching methods employed. The Panel was also interested to note the explicit role of the Department's Recruitment and Employability Committee which was tasked with articulating the ILOs, especially those pertaining to generic transferable skills, to students.
- 4.2.2 The Review Panel was keen to explore with the Head of Department and staff, how the Department managed the different levels of experience of students entering Level 1. The Department acknowledged this as a challenge, particularly in Geography, which was involved in 3 faculties. The Head of Department confirmed that, due to the large numbers, it was not possible to allocate students to laboratories on the basis of experience. However, the Department regularly reviewed the first year curriculum to develop ways of challenging good students. The undergraduate students and the academic staff interviewed indicated their support for the first year curriculum, however, they had concerns related to the size of the classes and the associated logistical and resource problems this caused. This issue is covered in more detail in Paragraph 4.8 below.

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

### **Feedback**

- 4.3.1 The Review Panel was pleased to note the feedback from students at all levels regarding the approachable, supportive nature of the departmental staff. The Panel **commends** the Department for its close-knit community spirit which the Panel considered to be particularly admirable given the Department's location across two sites.
- 4.3.2 The Review Panel noted the wide range of assessment methods used to assess student performance and provide feedback on achievement – the majority of which acted as both formative and summative assessment. The Panel also noted that, in comparison to the high NSS scores attained by the Department in other areas, its score for the time taken to return assessment feedback was relatively low. The Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment confirmed that a conscious decision had been taken, in the context of increasing student numbers, to maintain the quality of feedback and take longer to return work. The Panel was keen to explore further the effect of increased student numbers and the increase in research output on assessment feedback. The Head of Department and staff were aware of the challenge and had introduced ways to ameliorate the effects of competing demands. The Panel acknowledged these efforts which included the introduction of a standardised essay feedback sheet. Given the evidence provided by the staff that students were not always aware of what constituted feedback, the Panel **recommends** that the Department should clarify to students the nature and extent of the feedback that will be provided. The Panel remained concerned, however, about the sustainability of the current provision in the context of increasing student numbers.

### **Achievement**

- 4.3.3 The Review Panel was keen to investigate the comments of the External Examiners' regarding the lower than expected instances of first class performances at all levels. The Panel suggested that this could be reflective of the wide range of experience of the

first year intake. The Head of Department, Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment and the staff interviewed accepted this also identified a reluctance of staff to use the full range of grades in the University's Code of Assessment (COA) in the past. It was noted that the Department had attempted to address this by adopting Grade Related Criteria with descriptors for only three of the five grades at the 'A' Level. This was primarily to parallel the structure of other grades, ie to have an A+ A and A-, but in addition, they reported difficulties with devising descriptors for 5 grades. The Panel noted the support of the External Examiners for this approach. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department seeks guidance from the Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group on the use of the full scale available to them in the Code of Assessment as it was considered this would further encourage the use of higher grades.

#### **Dissertation (Geography)**

- 4.3.4 The Review Panel heard from the students interviewed that the Department had supported them well with their dissertations. The Department provided a half day Dissertation training course in December and all staff were available to offer advice if needed. The students present from other faculties compared GES favourably against other departments. The students raised a particular issue regarding proof reading of dissertations. Their perception was that not all Supervisors were following the agreed procedures regarding proof reading of dissertations. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department ensures that Supervisors follow the agreed procedures and consider whether further guidelines for staff and students would be useful to ensure consistent student expectations as well as consistency of approach with regard to support for, and consequently, assessment of, dissertations.
- 4.3.5 The Review Panel was interested to explore with the Head of Department and the Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment their views on the standards of Geography dissertations given the body of opinion noted by the External Panel Members that the quality of work had deteriorated nationally. The Department acknowledged that this was a particular challenge nationally and outlined their plans to highlight the importance of this piece of work to the students. They planned to introduce peer assessed research presentations which would count towards credit in Level 4 as a means of encouraging students to identify their topics in a more timely way. They also advised that as part of their revision of the Honours programme they were considering increasing the weighting of the dissertation. The Review Panel was encouraged to learn that this aspect of the programme was subject to on-going scrutiny.

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

##### **Fieldwork**

The Review Panel noted from the SER that there had been a reduction in the amount of fieldwork in the early part of the course, particularly in Geography. The Head of Department confirmed that they had replaced the residential Field course in Level 1, with local fieldwork for all students as part of the lab class. The Department advised that the change was due to financial constraints but had had a positive effect on retention through the experience being available to all students and not only those going on to Level 2. The Head of Department and staff reported that fieldwork was a major attraction for students, particularly in Earth Sciences, and noted the Department's commitment to it in terms of the learning experience of the student,

while they acknowledged that it was financially challenging for the students. The Department noted that they might have to consider fieldwork in term time to free up the students' summer break. Despite the financial challenges, the students interviewed were very supportive of fieldwork particularly as a bonding exercise.

### **Independent Mapping Project (Earth Sciences)**

- 4.4.2 The Review Panel was keen to explore the reduction of the Independent Mapping Project in Earth Sciences from 6 weeks to 2 weeks. The Head of Department and the Director of Teaching Learning and Assessment reported that it focussed students' minds and efficiency was much improved in terms of successful outcomes. They also reported that it was now more directed and more in line with professional practice. In addition, it reduced the financial burden on students by allowing them to work during the summer vacation. The students interviewed noted their preference for the Independent Mapping Project to be longer as they enjoyed the experience, however, they fully understood the rationale for the change. The Panel further explored whether there was any impact on recruitment given that other courses across the UK offered the opportunity of longer projects. The staff interviewed felt strongly that it was not appropriate to compare the current University of Glasgow provision with the rest of the UK as Glasgow was offering a unique portfolio of a mapping project and laboratory work which had proved very popular with the students. The Review Panel acknowledged the benefits of the portfolio approach in Earth Sciences, which unlike other institutions, provides a mapping project and laboratory work, and **recommends** that the Department explain these to students at the recruitment stage, making particular reference to employability.

### **PGT Provision**

- 4.4.3 The Review Panel highlighted a lack of available data in the SER comparing the previous iteration of the PGT provision with the current provision. It was acknowledged that the MSc programmes were running for the first time, however, the Panel felt that information from the previous iteration would have been helpful. The main concerns of the MRes students who met with the Panel related to the quality and level of the mandatory statistics classes provided by the Faculty. They felt that they were included with a wide range of students of differing abilities, some of whom did not appear to know why they were there. The students acknowledged, however, that this was not a comment on the Department but rather ESRC funding system which made attendance compulsory.

### **Honours Options**

- 4.4.4 The Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment reported that for strategic and pedagogic reasons, the Department had taken the decision to reduce the number of Honours options from 6 to 4 across 2 years. She sought the Panel's view on this. The Review Panel confirmed that they had no concerns with the width and breadth of the provision and gave particular praise to the width and breadth of options available in human geography.

## **4.5 Student Recruitment**

- 4.5.1 The Review Panel **commends** the work of the Department's Recruitment, Progress and Employability Committee and its role in the development of the Department's recruitment web-site which was highlighted as an example of good practice.

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/gesinfo/> . The Panel viewed the recruitment web-site as an excellent resource for current as well as prospective students and **recommends** that the Department highlight the link from the recruitment web-site to the main Department page to make it easier to find.

- 4.5.2 The Review Panel **commends** the Department's close links with secondary school teachers as well as the "Geomorphology Road Show" which took hands-on experiments to S5 and S6 children to encourage interest in the subject.
- 4.5.3 The Review Panel noted a low number of international students at undergraduate level and asked the Department what their plans were in this regard. The Department acknowledged that their international students were mainly incoming exchange students and reported that, although the PGT provision was proving popular with international students, recruitment at undergraduate level was to some extent out of the control of the Department due to the Faculty entry system. Although they had no immediate plans to increase the number of outgoing exchange students or full-time international student recruitment, they had recently spoken to the International and Postgraduate Service (IPS) about possibilities in the American market. They advised that a current recruitment challenge for them in Europe was the increasing number of German universities teaching in English at no fee.

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

##### **Employability**

- 4.6.1 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for its efforts in promoting Employability through the curriculum and **commends** the role of the Recruitment and Employability Committee (REC) in this regard.
- 4.6.2 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for its close liaison with industry, particularly through the development of the PGT provision and suggests that the Department consider the establishment of an Industry Liaison Group to formalise these links further.
- 4.6.3 The staff who met with the Panel reported that they had an extensive database of graduate destinations from the last 20 years but acknowledged a need to improve communication with recent graduates, some of whom were missing from their records. The students who met with the Panel, acknowledged the efforts in the provision of careers advice, such as CV support; talks from Employers, Careers Service and former students. This was particularly the case in Geography. However, the students suggested that more personal guidance and information on opportunities to study abroad would be helpful. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department expand the careers information provided on the website to include information on opportunities to study abroad.

##### **Retention**

- 4.6.4 The Review Panel heard from the staff that the Department monitors retention, in terms of progress from each Level of the programme, on an ongoing basis which in turn informs departmental change and curriculum development. It noted that this was done via the RPEC, which also monitors performance, progression and identifies students at risk. The Review Panel **commends** the Department for the quality of the student experience, the teaching provision and the strong sense of community and staff-student relationships. The Panel noted concerns, however, that the strong staff-student relationships may be affected with increasing student numbers.

### **Support for Students with Disabilities**

- 4.6.5 The Review Panel noted concerns from the SER and from students and staff regarding the provision for students with disabilities. Student concerns related to the support for students with dyslexia where it was reported that they had been led to believe that the Department would provide them with advance notice of lecture topics. This had not happened. Staff concerns related to the support provided to them by the Disability Service and the perception that too much responsibility was being devolved to departments. They highlighted logistical problems relating to examination invigilation and the provision of appropriate equipment and support in examinations. The staff did acknowledge that one of the Department's Disability Officers was currently on research leave, nevertheless, the Panel felt that this was an area which should be addressed at University rather than departmental level. The Panel **recommends** that the Clerk of Senate consider the level of University support provided to departments in relation to students with disabilities.

### **4.7 The Quality of Learning Opportunities**

#### **Postgraduate Provision**

- 4.7.1 The Review Panel was encouraged to hear from the MRes students who met with the Panel positive comments about the Department and its staff. The students also welcomed the opportunities they were given to become involved in teaching activity.
- 4.7.2 The Review Panel also met with MSc students who outlined some serious operational difficulties with the provision to date. The Review Panel was concerned that the difficulties outlined were more than normal teething problems. The problems were related to organisational issues, specifically software which didn't work; lack of exercise guidelines; practicals cancelled at short notice - to date students had received fewer labs than expected in one course — and out of date PowerPoint presentations. The students expressed concerns about the impact of these problems on their assessment and employability. The Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Department meets with the current MSc students as a matter of urgency to address their concerns.

***CLERK'S NOTE:*** *The Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment, Dr Jo Sharp, met with the MSc students on 18 and 19<sup>th</sup> February 2008 and identified a detailed action plan which was circulated to students on 25 February 2008. The action plan requires the course co-ordinator to meet with the students on a weekly basis. MSc teaching staff will meet weekly and Dr Sharp will attend the meetings fortnightly to monitor progress. The possible impact of these problems would be taken into consideration at the point of assessment.*

*On behalf of The Review Panel, the Convener **commends** the Department for its prompt and thorough response and anticipates an up-date on the action plan as part of the Department's response to this report.*

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

#### **Student Numbers**

- 4.8.1 The Review Panel noted the high level of learning and teaching resources currently available within the Department, however, concerns were raised as to whether this could be sustained were student numbers to increase. The current class sizes in Levels 1 and 2 were already of concern to students and staff who reported problems with a



lack of microscopes (Earth Sciences) and IT provision in teaching laboratories (Geography).

- 4.8.2 The Review Panel heard concerns from staff members regarding the conflict between research and teaching in the context of increasing student numbers. This impacted, for example, on their ability to return assessments within the published timescales. The Review Panel was keen to explore this further with the Dean and the Head of Department. The HoD highlighted that one of the difficulties was the unequal spread of student numbers across the Department with Human Geography staff carrying a higher load than other staff. He confirmed that measures were being taken to address the issue of SSRs with the appointment of two additional Human Geography staff in the current session. The Panel acknowledged that another difficulty for the Department was its lack of direct control on undergraduate student numbers as students enter Level 3 from other faculties with different entry rules. The Director of Learning, Teaching and Assessment also drew attention to the difficulties associated with increasing class sizes, for example, providing large enough classes, sufficient IT support and adequate laboratory resources. The Panel, Dean and Head of Department considered that the University's plans to introduce generic undergraduate regulations might ameliorate the effect of increasing numbers. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department and Faculty monitor the effect of the generic undergraduate regulations on student numbers and associated staff student ratios and, if necessary, consider limiting student numbers by increasing the entry requirements into Level 3. Consideration should also be given to comparative Faculty data to establish the extent of the issue reported.

#### **Staffing – Probationary Staff**

- 4.8.3 The Review Panel met with a group of probationary staff. The probationary staff confirmed that they had been provided with a high level of support from the Department. They particularly welcomed the Department's open door policy and the allocation of a Mentor to each new member of staff. There were a few concerns voiced, however, regarding slight inconsistencies in the approach of the Mentors.
- 4.8.4 The Review Panel was keen to explore the teaching loads for probationary staff. When questioned about the departmental workload model, they confirmed that they were aware of its existence and the Head of Department's efforts in managing it, however there was not clear evidence that the probationary staff were aware of what an average teaching load should be. The probationary staff expressed concerns about their workload as well as the lack of administrative support. The Panel acknowledged that the Department was working with a reduced level of secretarial support due to sick leave and they were currently trying to put in place alternative arrangements. The Panel also heard from the Head of the Department that probationary staff were allocated a half-load in line with the agreed departmental workload model. The Panel concluded that the problem was one of perception. The Review Panel **recommends** that the workload model and allocation of work is communicated more clearly to new staff and that the mentoring practice in the Department should be more standardised with a view to ensuring consistency of practice. The Review Panel also **recommends** that the Department produces a handbook for new staff which would help to clarify the workload model; allocation of work and mentoring further as well as provide information about other departmental procedures

#### **Staffing – GTAs**

- 4.8.5 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for the well integrated use of GTA teaching in their programmes. Student feedback on the GTAs was very positive, however, the students felt that international GTAs were sometimes difficult to

understand. This was supported by comments from the GTAs who felt that international GTAs could be better matched with Laboratory Leaders to help with possible language difficulties. In terms of generic teaching skills, the GTAs were satisfied with the level of support given, however, they suggested that training and skills in general classroom control, would be very helpful. The GTAs welcomed the opportunity to join the classes and did not feel pressurised to do so by departmental staff. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Learning and Teaching Centre and Department investigate the possibility of providing more training for GTAs in the form of classroom and student management skills.

### **IT Provision**

- 4.8.6 Following discussions with the Dean, staff and students, the Review Panel was assured that the amount of IT equipment provided was adequate. The Panel concluded that the main concern related to the management of the IT resources, for example, the speedy resolution of software issues which was a particular concern raised by the MSc students, see paragraph 4.7.2. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department consider assigning departmental responsibility for ensuring that IT and software issues are managed and resolved in a timely manner.

### **MOODLE**

- 4.8.7 The Review Panel was keen to explore with the staff and students, their experience of MOODLE. Student comments highlighted problems with navigation following recent University-wide structural changes. The Dean confirmed that the effectiveness of the new Faculty MOODLE structure was yet to be evaluated. The students also highlighted an inconsistency of use and the level of ability amongst staff. The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department provides additional training in the use of MOODLE, for those staff who feel they would benefit from it, to ensure consistency of use across the Department. In addition, the Panel **recommends** that the Department introduces a MOODLE site for staff to share experience and expertise in using the software.
- 4.8.8 One of the undergraduate student groups interviewed expressed concerns regarding the internet access at the University's halls of residences provided by a company called Masterpoint. The link had continually crashed causing them difficulties with their assessments. The Student Panel member advised that this issue was being reviewed by the SRC. The Review Panel supports the efforts of the SRC in this regard and encourages the SRC to seek assistance from the University in reaching a speedy resolution to the problem.

### **Accommodation**

- 4.8.9 The Review Panel was keen to explore any issues associated with the Department's split site location resulting from the merger of Earth Sciences and Geography. Although there were no major concerns voiced by the students in relation to the split-site location, the staff expressed concerns about communication difficulties and the duplication of tasks. The Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Faculty address staff concerns on communication difficulties and duplication of tasks through its submission to the Estates Strategy with a view to the Department being located on one site.

## 5. Maintaining the Standards of Awards

### External Examiners

- 5.1 The Review Panel was pleased to note from the SER that External Examiner feedback was central to the Department's "*on-going self evaluation of Learning and Teaching*". It was also encouraged to see that the External Examiner reports were available to all staff via MOODLE and were formally discussed at the DLTAC meetings.

### Plagiarism

- 5.2 Although this issue was not addressed directly with the students or staff on the day of the review, the Panel welcomed the Department's response to this as noted in the SER, in the form of a clear procedure where cases of plagiarism are identified. The Panel also welcomed the Department's plans to focus on a preventative rather than a punitive approach in future.

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

- 6.1 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for the quality of the student learning experience. The Student Panel member was pleased to note that the Department was ahead of other departments in a number of issues such as employability.
- 6.2 The Review Panel was keen to explore the Department's approach to feedback from students. It was pleased to note that informal feedback was encouraged and it was acknowledged that the fieldwork element of the programmes made this a very effective line of communication. The Panel also noted that the Department encouraged student feedback via MOODLE and more significant issues were discussed via the SSLCs. It was noted that student attendance at the SSLCs was relatively poor in comparison to the number of staff who attend. Although the Panel recognised that the number of staff in attendance demonstrated the Department's commitment to the importance of the SSLCs, the Panel felt that student attendance might increase if the number of staff in attendance was reduced to encourage students to speak out. The Review Panel **commends** the Department for providing the SSLC minutes via MOODLE and encourages the Department to review the structure of its SSLC meetings to increase student participation.
- 6.3 The Review Panel **commends** the Department for its outstanding NSS results and the positive use it made of them in the documentation. The results were seen as exemplary both within the University and nationally as supported by the external panel members.

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

### *Key Strengths*

- Broad range of provision across Earth Sciences and Geography
- Excellent teaching provision given the high level of research currently being undertaken in the Department
- Smooth transition following the merger of the two departments

- Excellent efforts in undergraduate recruitment. This includes the recruitment website, the Recruitment and Employability Committee as well as excellent connections with Secondary Schools in Scotland
- Enthusiastic and committed teaching staff which has created a close-knit community with strong staff-student relationships
- Commitment to student fieldwork
- Ongoing developments in student learning at undergraduate level
- Strong industry links
- Developmental approach to undergraduate Graduate Teaching Assistants
- The Department's concern for, and awareness of, the employability of its graduates which it promotes through the curriculum
- The Department has fostered an open and dynamic environment, supportive of change and enhancement.

#### *Areas to be improved or enhanced*

- Sustainability of provision in the context of increasing student numbers
- The location of the Department on two sites
- The financial difficulties for students in relation to Fieldwork
- The issue of the lower than expected instances of first class performances at all levels
- Departmental software and IT support
- Communication of staff workload model
- Expand the provision of information on employability to include information on opportunities to study abroad.

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

##### *Conclusions*

The Review Panel commends the Department on the successful merger of the Department of Geography & Geomatics with the Division of Earth Sciences and on the strong sense of community amongst its students. Although a number of recommendations have been made, the Panel has no concerns regarding the quality of the Department, its provision or operation.

##### *Recommendations*

The recommendations interspersed in the preceding report and summarised below are made in the spirit of encouragement to the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences. They have been cross referenced to the paragraphs in the text of the report to which they refer and are ranked in order of priority.

##### *Recommendation 1:*

The Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Department meets with the current MSc students as a matter of urgency to address their concerns. [Paragraph 4.7.2]

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

##### *Recommendation 2:*

Review Panel **strongly recommends** that the Faculty address staff concerns on communication difficulties and duplication of tasks through its submission to the

Estates Strategy with a view to the Department being located on one site. [Paragraph 4.8.9]

For the attention of: **Dean/Head of Department/Director of Estates**

*Recommendation 3:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department and Faculty monitor the effect of the generic undergraduate regulations on student numbers and associated staff student ratios and, if necessary, consider limiting student numbers by increasing the entry requirements into Level 3. Consideration should also be given to comparative Faculty data to establish the extent of the issue reported. [Paragraph 4.8.2]

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

*Recommendation 4:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department seeks guidance from the Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group on the use of the full scale available to them in the Code of Assessment as it was considered this would further encourage the use of higher grades. [Paragraph 4.3.3]

For the attention of: **Head of Department/Convener of the Code of Assessment Working Group**

*Recommendation 5:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the workload model and allocation of work is communicated more clearly to new staff and that the mentoring practice in the Department should be more standardised with a view to ensuring consistency of practice. The Review Panel also **recommends** that the Department produces a handbook for new staff which would help to clarify the workload model; allocation of work and mentoring further as well as provide information about other departmental procedures. [Paragraph 4.8.4]

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

*Recommendation 6:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department consider assigning departmental responsibility for ensuring that IT and software issues are managed and resolved in a timely manner. [Paragraph 4.8.6]

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

*Recommendation 7:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department provides additional training in the use of MOODLE, for those staff who feel they would benefit from it, to ensure consistency of use across the Department. In addition, the Panel **recommends** that the Department introduces a MOODLE site for staff to share experience and expertise in using the software. [Paragraph 4.8.7]

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

*Recommendation 8:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Learning and Teaching Centre and Department investigate the possibility of providing more training for GTAs in the form of classroom and student management skills. [Paragraph 4.8.5]

For the attention of: **Head of Department/Learning and Teaching Centre**

*Recommendation 9:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department ensures that Supervisors follow the agreed procedures and consider whether further guidelines for staff and students would be useful to ensure consistent student expectations as well as consistency of approach with regard to support for, and consequently, assessment of, dissertations.

[Paragraph 4.3.4]

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

*Recommendation 10:*

The Panel viewed the recruitment web-site as an excellent resource for current as well as prospective students and **recommends** that the Department highlight the link from the recruitment web-site to the main Department page to make it easier to find.

[Paragraph 4.5.1]

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

*Recommendation 11:*

The Review Panel acknowledged the benefits of the portfolio approach in Earth Sciences, which unlike other institutions, provides a mapping project and laboratory work, and **recommends** that the Department explain these to students at the recruitment stage, making particular reference to employability. [Paragraph 4.4.2]

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

*Recommendation 12:*

The Review Panel **recommends** that the Department expand the careers information provided on the website to include information on opportunities to study abroad. [Paragraph 4.6.3]

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

*Recommendation 13:*

The Panel **recommends** that the Clerk of Senate consider the level of University support provided to departments in relation to students with disabilities [Paragraph 4.6.5]

For the attention of: **The Clerk of Senate**

*Recommendation 14:*

Given the evidence provided by the staff that students were not always aware of what constituted feedback, the Panel **recommends** that the Department should clarify to students the nature and extent of the feedback that will be provided. [Paragraph 4.3.2]

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