

**UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW**

**Academic Standards Committee - Friday 13 January 2006**

**Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment:  
Report of the Review of Biomedical and Life Sciences held on 2 and 3  
March 2005**

**Dr Jack Aitken, Clerk to the Review Panel**

**December 2005**

**Review Panel:**

Professor Peter Holmes (Convener)	Vice Principal (Biomedicine)
Professor David Boxer (External Subject Specialist)	Vice Principal (Research & Enterprise) University of Dundee
Professor David Coates (External Subject Specialist)	Dean of Life Sciences University of Bradford
Professor David Bennett (Senate Assessor on Court)	Professor of Small Animal Clinical Studies
Dr Bob Hill (Member of Cognate Department)	Deputy Dean, Faculty of Physical Sciences
Dr Robert Matthew (Teaching and Learning Service)	Director, Teaching and Learning Service

**1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The Institute of Biomedical & Life Sciences (IBLS) was established in 1994 as a single unit formed through the amalgamation of eleven previously independent departments. It became a Faculty of the University in 2000. It is one of the largest centres for biological teaching and research in Europe, with c. 140 permanent academic staff, 200 contract staff and almost 300 research students. In 2004-05, there were 650 students in Level 1, 650 in Level 2, 330 in Level 3 (Honours), 94 in Level 3 (Designated degrees), 23 on work placements, 346 at Level 4 and a total of 55 taught postgraduates.
- 1.2 In 1997, the taught provision of the then IBLS was assessed under two headings, Organismal Biology and Molecular & Cellular Biology, in accordance with the terms of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council's system of Teaching Quality Assessment. In that exercise, provision in both categories was rated as Excellent. Research in the Faculty was rated 5/5\* in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise.
- 1.3 The present review considered the following range of programmes offered by the Faculty:-
  - 19 BSc Honours/MSci degree programmes, including 2 offered as joint programmes with other Departments. (These programmes are additionally available to qualifying students in the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry and Faculty of Veterinary Medicine.)

- BSc Honours/MSci programmes in Immunology; Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition; and in Sports Medicine. (Students take IBLs courses in the qualifying years for these programmes; final years are organised and delivered by the Faculty of Medicine.)
  - The three-year Designated degree programmes corresponding to the above-noted degrees. (Also open to qualifying students in the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry and Faculty of Veterinary Medicine.)
  - The suite of 6 separate Designated degrees
  - The range of non-Honours qualifying courses
  - The suite of 8 one-year intercalating degree programmes offered to qualifying students in the Medical and Dental Schools and Faculty of Veterinary Medicine.
  - The suite of 15 taught postgraduate MRes programmes
  - The MSc in Sport, Medicine and Exercise Science offered jointly with the University of Strathclyde (administering university) and Glasgow Caledonian University.
- 1.4 The Faculty also makes contributions to teaching offered by other Departments and Faculties which are subject to separate Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (DPTLA) reviews.
- 1.5 In view of the scale of the Faculty's taught provision, the review was conducted over a two-day rather than the more conventional one-day period. In the course of the two days, the Panel met with Professor John Coggins, the Dean of the Faculty, Dr Roger Downie, Director of the Undergraduate School, Dr David Miller, Director of the Graduate School, Dr Joanna Wilson, Deputy Director of the Graduate School, staff in key administrative and/or management roles, hourly paid staff, and probationary staff. A meeting was also held with staff with responsibilities for the Immunology, Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition and Sports Medicine degrees. Further meetings were held with groups of students on the MRes programmes, Level 1 & 2 undergraduate students, and groups of students taking Designated, Honours, MSci and intercalating degrees. The Panel additionally made a visit to two teaching laboratories.
- 1.6 The Faculty had provided a Self-Evaluation Report (SER), together with supporting documentation in accordance with the University's requirements for DPTLA reviews. A large number of staff and students had contributed to the production of the SER. A draft had been circulated to all staff and to undergraduate class representatives, inviting comment. Many had responded either in writing or at specially convened meetings. The briefer SERs provided for Immunology and for Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition also assisted the Panel.

## **2. Summary of Findings**

- 2.1 The Panel found there to be a very high level of excellence in activities relating to the Faculty's provision in teaching, learning and assessment at all levels. Teaching was informed by research, was sensitive to students' needs, was aware of the general and specific issues in the areas covered and was robust and responsive in reviewing process and content. There was extensive evidence of staff commitment and dedication and impressive instances of innovative practice. The feedback from students to the Panel was extremely positive. It is in this general context that the following points are made.

### **3. Range of Provision**

- 3.1 The range of provision was strongly commended by the Panel. Students were highly appreciative of its breadth and flexibility, and these were key attractions with respect to recruitment. Staff made the point that it was difficult to ensure that staff resources fully matched student demand for subjects. There were also issues in reconciling the ebb and flow of student demand for subjects with Faculty research priorities. Whilst noting that it was possible that it would prove difficult to sustain fully, the Panel wished to endorse particularly the breadth of provision available to students at Levels 1 & 2. It was recognised that a degree structure that required choice at the end of Level 1 studies would diminish the student experience.
- 3.2 Honours programmes were rich and diverse and benefited from the research-intensive character of the Faculty. The Faculty was reminded of the need to continue to monitor the financial viability of Honours options that attracted relatively few students.
- 3.3 The contribution of the range of available provision to the career development of graduates was also characterised as excellent.
- 3.4 Constraints on the numbers of student placements available were noted; the Panel was pleased to hear that most students who expressed interest were successfully found placements.
- 3.5 It was evident that there was a high level of integration of provision, both vertically and horizontally.
- 3.6 The Panel particularly praised the quality of practical teaching and the MRes programme.
- 3.7 The Panel also commended the extent to which, through the efforts of the Faculty, degrees could include components from elsewhere in the University.

### **4. Management of Teaching/Staffing Matters**

- 4.1 The Panel noted that the Faculty employed a relatively high number of committees in support of its provision and advised that the situation was kept under review to ensure that only the necessary minimum number of such bodies was maintained.
- 4.2 The Panel particularly commended the running of Level 1 provision.
- 4.3 The Panel heard positive reports concerning the contribution made by Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). The experience of acting as demonstrators was seen by GTAs as highly valuable for career development. GTAs reported a good correspondence between their teaching responsibilities and own areas of expertise. The Panel recommended that means be developed to provide feedback for demonstrators from staff and students, at the end of laboratories and the courses themselves. GTAs also put the view that they wished to contribute to course development, and it was further recommended that means be identified to permit this.
- 4.4 The Panel noted that probationary staff identified concerns as well as very good aspects regarding the New Lecturer Programme. It was recommended that the Teaching & Learning Service gave further consideration to these concerns. A separate note of detailed comments was made by the Panel, and an appropriately anonymised version of this would be provided for TLS.
- 4.5 The Panel noted concerns voiced by teaching assistants and recommended that the Faculty sought to identify means to permit and facilitate the further engagement of such staff in scholarly activity.
- 4.6 Students commented that the numbers in laboratory sessions were generally optimal.

- 4.7 It was considered that the student experience in some areas could be improved through the greater inculcation of a sense of identity in the various student cohorts. Partly as a result of the need to convert accommodation for other purposes, some common room and similar space mon room space was available to some but not all students. The Panel accepted that it was difficult to promote the sense of group identity, and noted that there had been a reduction in the volume of common room and related space, which had of necessity been converted to other uses, but the Faculty had good examples of very successful student-led societies. Again, it should be noted that the standard of provision was overall of a very high order.
- 4.8 The Panel noted the phased approach the Faculty was taking to transferring from its current Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to Moodle. The latter had been selected by the University as its preferred VLE.

## **5. Curriculum Design & Content**

- 5.1 Curriculum design and content were excellent. The MSci was particularly praised in this regard.
- 5.2 The Panel commended a number of innovative practices: in the treatment of Employability, Ethics teaching and the peer group assessment in Level 1.
- 5.3 The Panel noted the progress made by the Faculty in developing Programme Specifications and encouraged their expeditious completion.

## **6. Assessment**

- 6.1 The Panel identified several aspects of good practice in the area of assessment, notably in Genetics, where, as an example, students were asked to 'mark' the work of previous students. It was considered that such methods could be usefully disseminated across the Faculty.
- 6.2 The range of assessment methods employed was generally considered very good. Students confirmed that they had a good level of understanding of expected standards.
- 6.3 The Panel identified a number of variations in assessment practice which it was felt should be closely monitored by the Faculty to prevent any inappropriate inconsistency. Specifically noted were: double marking, different weightings for the same types of assessment in honours options, variations in the level of feedback (it was noted that there is no feedback provided on MCQ assessments), credit ratings, and the carrying forward of Level 3 grades into Level 4. In considering these matters, it was further recommended that the Faculty reflected on the role of the individual degree teams, and whether the balance between the level of autonomy and need for overall control was appropriate.
- 6.4 The Panel recommended that the Faculty paid due regard to the implications of the change in assessment methods experienced by students entering Level 3, where, relative to earlier years, there was an increase in the use of essays and corresponding reduction in the use of MCQ assessments.
- 6.5 The Faculty was recommended to review phasing to ensure that students did not experience periods where there was an undue concentration of assessments. As with any degree programme, there was need also to ensure a coherent approach was taken to setting assessments to ensure that the overall volume was appropriate. It was accepted that an increase in the level of formative assessment would contribute to increased workloads for staff as well as students.
- 6.6 It was recommended that consideration should be given to increasing the amount of formative feedback provided in Level 4. The Panel welcomed reports of recent

developments in this regard, where work was submitted in draft form. It was noted that Level 4 students appreciated the practice where they were interviewed mid-session and provided with feedback on their progress. Whilst necessarily time-consuming, this did not add to the volume of assessment, and the Panel considered this measure worthy of consideration for adoption more widely.

## **7. Student Recruitment, Support & Progression**

- 7.1 The Panel commended the Faculty's considerable success in student recruitment in a national context where attracting students onto science programmes was markedly difficult. The Panel also acknowledged the Faculty's efforts with regard to Widening Participation.
- 7.2 It was the view of the Panel that, in general, arrangements for supporting students were operating very well. This again provided evidence of the high level of staff commitment.
- 7.3 Students the Panel met felt generally that course Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes were fully met. The Panel considered that Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes were appropriate for courses, and that expectations of students were appropriate to levels of study.
- 7.4 The Panel recommended that the Faculty undertook detailed cohort analyses to try to identify reasons why students were not progressing through to graduate. The same exercise should also be carried out for the courses provided by the Faculty of Medicine.
- 7.5 Students particularly valued the provision of 'taster' sessions as means of assisting them with curriculum choices. Guidance was generally rated highly by students met by the Panel, although some felt that they did not always appreciate the implications of different regulations operating at different levels of study in good time. Students also requested that more be done using either Honours students or their work to help inform Level 1 and 2 students' choice of Honours programme. It was recommended that the Faculty considered introducing such a mechanism to guide student choice.
- 7.6 The Panel suggested that student representatives might do more to publicise their existence to other students. This matter would be raised with the President of the Students' Representative Council in discussions regarding the training of course and Faculty representatives.
- 7.7 The Student-Staff Consultative Committee system was seen as working very well generally, although problems were encountered by some student representatives where SSLC meetings conflicted with teaching. It was felt that the relative autonomy of programmes contributed to such minor inconsistencies.
- 7.8 The Panel noted the problems resulting from the ceiling on student numbers entering Honours in Pharmacology when many of the same courses were available to students entering Physiology, where there was no ceiling on numbers, and encouraged those concerned to review this matter.
- 7.9 Students reported difficulties, particularly in the later years, in reconciling the demands of study with the need to obtain income through part-time work. Staff were praised for their flexibility in seeking to accommodate student requests for alterations in timetabling as a result of work commitments.

## **8. *Immunology, Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition and Sports Medicine***

- 8.1 The DPTLA review included courses in Immunology, Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition and Sports Medicine provided by staff in the Faculty of

Medicine that contributed to degrees taken by students in the Faculty of Biomedical & Life Sciences.

- 8.2 The Panel noted that staff had sought to address concerns voiced by Level 3 students on the Immunology programme. Staff put the view that the present relatively low number of students did not represent the beginning of a trend. Staff reports that the quality of students entering Level 3 of the programme had declined were also noted, for Nutrition as well as Immunology. It was reported that there would be input from Nutrition to Level 2 provision in the attempt to improve the number and quality of students progressing to Honours level study.
- 8.3 The Panel was pleased to note reports that aspects of communications between staff in the two faculties were good and improving. Specific examples were provided for the Panel where contact between the units concerned had influenced teaching approaches. It was vital, however, that all necessary effort was made to secure the overall experience of students taking the relevant courses. Accordingly, the Panel recommended that discussions took place, convened by the Territorial Vice-Principal and involving the Dean of IBLS and Executive Dean of Medicine, together with relevant colleagues, to consider how matters might be further improved. The outcome of these discussions might involve establishment of a joint group to deal with matters such as student progression into and through relevant Faculty of Medicine courses, and arrangements for shared resources.
- 8.4 The Panel was pleased to note that funding had recently been secured to permit a key member of the team for the BSc Honours/Msci in Sports Medicine to resume his teaching duties on the programme. It was recommended, however, that the Faculty of Medicine carried out a succession planning exercise with respect to Sports Medicine.

## **9. Maintenance and Enhancement of Quality**

- 9.1 Quality Assurance arrangements operated generally very well across the Faculty. It was recommended that the level of variability in the completion of Annual Course Monitoring Reports (ACMRs) and in the responsiveness to student feedback was addressed. This variability applied also to the provision from the Faculty of Medicine. (In some areas, these matters were dealt with in exemplary fashion.) In discussion, Faculty staff commented that staff enthusiasm for the ACMR process was reduced by the perception that comments made concerning matters that impacted on quality - typically, teaching accommodation - were raised perennially, but were not felt to be acted upon at institutional level. The Panel heard also that this issue had been the subject of discussion elsewhere in the University. As a result of this, it was intended that action would take place to ensure that there were closer links between the outcomes of QA processes and strategic decision-making, and better arrangements in place to feed back to staff information on actions taken to address reported shortcomings in matters such as teaching accommodation. In the meeting with key staff, the specific matter of the quality and maintenance of facilities in Lecture theatres was raised. The absence of an officer with responsibility across the campus for relatively minor but highly important matters such as ensuring that light bulbs worked was seen as directly affecting the quality of provision. The Panel recommended that this issue was brought to the attention of appropriate officers.
- 9.2 It was noted that the Clerk of Senate and Head of the Senate Office would meet with Faculty colleagues to discuss ways in which, whilst retaining the robustness of QA processes, these processes could be reoriented in ways which reduced the QA burden for the Faculty.

## 10. Self-Evaluation Reports

- 10.1 The Self-Evaluation Report (SER) had been very helpful to the Panel. This resulted in part from the candour with which the document dealt with issues confronting the Faculty that were difficult to address. It was noted that the SER would be used by the Senate Office to assist departments undergoing DPTLA in the future. The briefer SERs provided for Immunology and for Physiology, Sports Science & Nutrition had also assisted the Panel.

## 11. Recommendations

- 11.1 It is recommended that the Faculty bears in mind the need to continue to monitor the financial viability of Honours options that attract relatively few students. *[Para 3.2 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.2 It is recommended that the Faculty continually monitors to ensure it is maintaining only the minimum number of committees necessary for the management of its provision. *[Para 4.1 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.3 It is recommended that means are developed to provide feedback for demonstrators from staff and students, at the end of laboratories and of the relevant courses. It is further recommended that means be identified to permit GTAs to contribute to course development. *[Para 4.3 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.4 It is recommended that the Teaching & Learning Service gives further consideration to concerns expressed by probationary staff on the New Lecturer Programme. A separate note of detailed comments will be provided for TLS. *[Para 4.4 refers]*

**Action: Director, TLS**

- 11.5 It is recommended that the Faculty seeks to identify means to permit and facilitate the further engagement of Teaching Assistants in scholarly activity. *[Para 4.5 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.6 It is recommended that the Faculty gives consideration to the development and introduction of means to promote a greater sense of group and discipline identity in the various student cohorts. *[Para 4.7 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.7 It is recommended that the Faculty continues the expeditious production of Programme Specifications. *[Para 5.3 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.8 It is recommended that Faculty considers the broader introduction of good assessment practices identified in Genetics where, for example, students are asked to 'mark' the work of previous students. *[Para 6.1 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.9 It is recommended that the Faculty monitors closely variations in assessment practice to ensure that there is no inappropriate inconsistency. Specifically noted are: double marking, different weightings for the same types of assessment in honours options, variations in the level of feedback (it is noted that there is no feedback provided on MCQ assessments), credit ratings, and the carrying forward of Level 3 grades into Level 4. In considering these matters, it is further recommended that the Faculty

reflects on the role of the individual degree teams, and whether the balance between the level of autonomy and need for overall control is appropriate. *[Para 6.3 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.10 It is recommended that the Faculty pays due regard to the implications of the change in assessment methods experienced by students entering Level 3, where the use of essays relatively increases and that of MCQs correspondingly decreases as compared with earlier years of the programmes. *[Para 6.4 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.11 It is recommended that the Faculty keeps under review the phasing of assessments to ensure that students do not experience periods where there was an undue concentration. *[Para 6.5 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.12 It is recommended that the Faculty monitors the overall volume of assessments to ensure its appropriateness. *[Para 6.5 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.13 It is recommended that consideration should be given to increasing the amount of formative feedback provided in Level 4. The Panel welcomed reports of recent developments in this regard, where work is submitted in draft form. It is noted that Level 4 students appreciate the practice where they are interviewed mid-session and provided with feedback on their progress. Whilst necessarily time-consuming, this did not add to the volume of assessment, and the Panel considers this measure worthy of consideration for adoption more widely. *[Para 6.6 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.14 It is recommended that the Faculty undertakes detailed cohort analyses to try to identify reasons why students were are not progressing through to graduate. The same exercise should also be carried out for the courses provided by the Faculty of Medicine. *[Para 7.4 refers]*

**Action: Dean of FBLS  
Executive Dean of Medicine**

- 11.15 It is recommended that the Faculty ensures that all reasonable steps are taken to ensure that students are aware of material differences in degree regulations as they progress from Level to Level. *[Para 7.5 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.16 It is recommended that, as a mechanism to aid students to choose their Honours programme, the Faculty gives consideration to using work produced by previous Honours cohorts, or asking current honours students to speak to those still to choose their degree path. *[Para 7.5 refers]*

**Action: Dean of Faculty**

- 11.17 It is recommended that student representatives do more to publicise their existence to other students. *[Para 7.6 refers]*

**Action: Head of Senate Office  
President, Students' Representative Council**

- 11.18 It is recommended that discussions take place, convened by the Territorial Vice-Principal and involving the Dean of FBLS and Executive Dean of Medicine, together with relevant colleagues, to consider how matters might be further improved concerning the degree programmes where there is Faculty of Medicine involvement.



The outcome of these discussions might involve establishment of a joint group to deal with issues such as student progression into and through relevant Faculty of Medicine courses, and arrangements for shared resources. *[Para 8.3 refers]*

**Action: Territorial Vice-Principal (Biomedicine)**

11.19 It was recommended that the Faculty of Medicine carry out a succession planning exercise with respect to the University's taught provision in Sports Medicine. *[Para 8.4 refers]*

**Action: Executive Dean of Medicine**

**First level heading**

First level section text

*Second level heading*

Second level section text

*Prepared by: Janet Fleming, Senate Office*

*Last modified on: Monday 19 December 2005*