

## Periodic Subject Review (PSR)

### Review of School of Physics and Astronomy: 13 and 14 February 2012

#### Report Summary

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The following is a brief summary of the full report of the review carried out in the School of Physics and Astronomy. *Periodic Subject Review* is an internal subject review focused on the quality of provision as experienced by students. The review looks at the range of programmes, course content, the teaching methods employed, assessment, facilities and much more.

The full report of the review is available publicly at:

[http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_239521\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_239521_en.pdf)

Further information about the PSR process can be found at:

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/senateoffice/qea/psr/>

*Italicised words* are explained in a glossary below.

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## Conclusions

The School of Physics and Astronomy provides a supportive and progressive learning environment that is enriched by strength in research and by a broad engagement with the external environment. The School's success in recruitment and its ambitions for continued growth are bringing challenges which the School is embracing, and which now require careful utilisation of resources and continued support from the College.

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## Key Strengths (Commendations)<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Student Support

- Supportive community that it has created, through which students are supported in their learning and encouraged to pursue individual interests and opportunities. [*para 3.6.4*]
- Provision of fortnightly small group supervisions from Level 2 onwards. [*para 3.7.3*]

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers refer to the paragraphs in the full report that contain the relevant discussion.

- Use of working parties with carefully defined remits to consider specific issues, such as the impact of increasing class sizes and the development of students' problem solving skills. [para 5.3]

## 2. Assessment

- Measured consideration of how to amend its assessment practices, the School is encouraged to move forward with its proposals for increasing *continuous assessment* in courses at Honours and Masters level, and to consider other forms of assessment, with careful evaluation of the impact on both staff and on students. [para 3.3.10]

## 3. Curriculum Design, Development and Content

- Proactive approach in keeping abreast of, and contributing to, developments in the external environment in relation to the Physics and Astronomy curriculum. [para 3.4.1]

## 4. Quality Assurance/Enhancement

- Constructive engagement with the PSR process, the open and reflective approach adopted in the *Self Evaluation Report (SER)*, the timely provision of all documentation required for the Review, the helpful preparation for the review visit particularly by the Convener of Learning and Teaching, and the cooperation and the positive attitudes displayed by staff and students in discussions with the Panel during the review visit. [para 1.9]

## 5. Learning and Teaching Resources

- On-going engagement of staff from the School with the *Learning and Teaching Centre* and the School's strong record of applications to the *Learning and Teaching Development Fund*. [para 5.6]

## 6. Recruitment

- Emphasis on a broad range of activities associated with recruitment and general awareness rising, at a time when there are pressures on staff to engage in other activities that have tangible and more immediate financial results. [para 3.5.1]

## Areas to be improved or enhanced

### Curriculum Design, Development and Content

- Investigate the feasibility of incorporating some additional basic programming into the undergraduate curriculum, in order to prepare students better with computing skills required throughout their programmes of study. [para 3.4.10]
- While sympathetic to the limitations placed on the School by *accreditation* requirements, the School should investigate options for further enhancing and promoting opportunities for *study abroad*, cognisant of the fact that study abroad is not intended to mirror the learning available at Glasgow, and that concerns about issues such as requirements for entry to Honours should be solvable. [para 3.4.16]

## Feedback

- Work is taken forward on the suggested production of an assessment guide/calendar, to be incorporated into course documentation, which would show students the various forms of feedback on assessment that they can expect to receive and the schedule for receiving such feedback. [para 3.3.17]

## Learning and Teaching Resources

- Carefully consider its requirements for enhancing the learning and teaching environment at the Observatory and maintains close contact with Estates and Buildings with a view to achieving as quickly as possible a successful refurbishment project similar to that achieved in the Kelvin Building Physics laboratories. [para 3.8.17]
- Estates and Buildings address two pressing issues regarding accessibility for disabled students and staff of the School: access to the Common Room in the Kelvin Building (as recommended in the 2006 *DPTLA*); and access to the University Observatory. [para 3.8.18]
- In recognition of the key role played by technicians in the successful delivery of laboratory-based teaching, the College consider approving the recruitment of a technician to replace the technician lost in 2010. [para 3.8.1]
- Continue to engage in dialogue with the College consideration for the introduction of dedicated teaching administration. [para 3.8.5]
- Consider ways of promoting cross-College interaction particularly between early career and other new-to-Glasgow staff, one suggestion for this being a cross-College poster event. [para 3.8.13]
- Consider how best University Teachers can be supported in their career development and given time and opportunity to develop the scholarship that is a requirement for promotion. [para 3.8.7]
- Implement a transparent scheme for the allocation of Demonstrators' duties, and a system of providing formal feedback on their performance, the latter as previously recommended in the 2006 *DPTLA review*. [para 3.8.12]
- Produce and publicise to School staff, an overview of the various funds available to support the enhancement of teaching, covering School, College, University and external sources. [para 5.6]

## Quality Assurance/Enhancement

- In the face of anticipated continued growth in the number of *PGT* students - with differing undergraduate backgrounds - consider how best to put in place the necessary diagnostic measures to identify whether there are significant gaps in incoming students' knowledge and skills, in order that these should be managed in an ordered way, whether by self-directed study or by additional staff support. [para 3.4.9]
- In view of comments regarding questionnaire fatigue, consider a range of means of eliciting meaningful feedback from students as recommended in the University's *Code of Practice on Obtaining and Responding to Feedback from Students* - [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_107529\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_107529_en.pdf) (e.g. using focus groups or mid-course questionnaires). [para 5.5]

- Carefully check all course and programme documentation to ensure that the content is both consistent with the *Code of Assessment* and reflects School practice. [para 3.3.3]
  - The *Senate Office* to produce guidance on how penalties for the late submission of coursework should operate where several sub-components contribute to an overall coursework mark. [para 3.3.4]
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## **Glossary of terms/acronyms used**

### **Accreditation**

Accreditation is a 'seal of approval' given to a programme by a professional body, association or other organisation. It has potential benefits for students, such as a recognised fast-track route for graduates seeking professional status or exemption from certain professional examinations.

### **Code of Assessment**

The University's Code of Assessment (implemented 2002-03) is designed to provide a fair and rational means of assessing students' performance. It provides instructions to staff on how assessment should be designed and carried out. It sets out verbal descriptions of each of the eight grades from A to H. Students' work is judged against these descriptions in terms of how well they have met the stated intended learning outcomes of the course or other assessed component and the corresponding grade is awarded. A guide to the Code of Assessment for students is available from the Senate Office website.

### **Code of Practice**

The University has its own procedures reflecting the QAA Code of Practice (a set of 9 inter-related documents for the guidance of higher education institutions in the management and assurance of academic quality and standards<sup>2</sup>). The Codes of Practice articulate a number of processes designed to enable quality to be assured and enhanced and standards maintained.

### **Continuous Assessment**

Continuous assessment refers to assessment of a students' participation in classes, tutorials, written, oral and other types of assessments that are held throughout the course. The opposite of continuous assessment would be where the assessment for a course is based entirely on some form of end of course examination.

### **Review of Departmental Programmes of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (DPTLA)**

Following the restructuring of the University in Session 2009-10 and the translation of departments and faculties to Schools and Colleges, the University's institution-led Internal Subject Review process, DPTLA, was re-named Periodic Subject Review (PSR). The review process remains largely the same but takes a subject-based approach, combining closely related subjects where it is feasible and in line with the new School and College structure.

### **Learning and Teaching Centre**

The Learning and Teaching Centre is a University Service whose role is to "help implement and develop the University's Learning and Teaching strategy, identify, assess and disseminate new developments and good practice which serve to enhance the student learning experience, and will work with colleagues throughout the University to bring about change".

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<sup>2</sup> Currently under review

### **Learning and Teaching Development Fund**

The Learning and Teaching Development Fund was established in 2000-01 to support developments in Learning and Teaching which are innovative, sustainable, transferable and contribute to the delivery of the objectives of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy. Awards made through this scheme have greatly contributed to the enhancement of learning and teaching across the University.

### **Postgraduate Taught or PGT**

Postgraduate Taught refers to taught programmes at postgraduate level, usually Masters.

### **Self Evaluation Report (SER)**

A Self Evaluation Report is a document prepared by the Subject(s)/School in advance of a PSR Review. Its purpose is to provide the Review Panel with an insight into the Subject(s)/School's view of itself, its strengths and areas it would wish to develop. It is normally prepared by the Head of School in conjunction with other staff but students should also be offered the opportunity to comment on whether or not it reflects the Subject(s)/School they know.

### **The Senate Office**

The Senate Office provides a range of academic services to staff and students across the University and to a number of external stakeholders. Senate has overall responsibility for academic matters in the University and the role of the Office derives very much from that.

### **Study abroad**

Study abroad is a term that is often used to refer to several programmes that offer opportunities for students to study in a European University, or one further afield, for a term, semester or year as part of their undergraduate degree programme. (The University's "Study Abroad Programme" is specifically designed for visiting students who elect to come to the University of Glasgow.)