Learning and Teaching Quality Committee

Report on the Periodic Programme Review of programmes in the Department of the History of Art and Archaeology

12 January 2016

Review panel

Dr Angus Lockyer Chair
Professor Deborah Howard University of Cambridge
Professor John Mack University of East Anglia
Professor Jan Toporowski
Professor Justin Watkins
Ms Anna Rader
Ms Jennifer Rhodes

Panel secretary

Miss Chloe Weanie

Departmental representatives

Professor Anna Contadini Head of Department
Dr Pamela Corey
Dr Heather Elgood Director, PGDip Asian Art
Dr Charles Gore
Dr Charlotte Horlyck Faculty Senior Tutor
Professor Shane McCausland Research Tutor
Dr Lukas Nickel PGT Tutor
Dr Simon O’Meara UG Admissions Tutor
Dr Stacey Pierson
Professor Scott Redford UG Examinations Officer
Dr Tania Tribe Undergraduate Tutor
Dr Louise Tythacott

Faculty representatives

Professor Gurharpal Singh Dean
Dr Charles Gore Associate Dean, Learning & Teaching
Dr Mandy Sadan Associate Dean, Research
Mr Jonathan Tanner Faculty Administrator
Mr Mat Schofield Team Leader (Student Support)
Ms Pascale Dionnet Faculty Officer (Student Support)
Mr Mat Poulton Faculty Officer (Student Support)
Dr Robert Ivermee Project Officer, School of Arts

Student representatives, including:

BA History of Art and Archaeology, 2nd year
BA History of Art and Archaeology, 3rd year
MA History of Art and Archaeology
PhD, 2nd year
PhD, 4th year
PhD part-time, 6th year

Professional services

Ms Alex Dawson Timetabling Co-ordinator (Estates & Facilities)
Mr Rory McGrath Exams & Assessments Manager (Registry)
## Table of contents

**Section**

1. **Summary of recommendations and good practice**
   1.1 Conclusion on Quality and Standards
   1.2 Good Practice
   1.3 Recommendations

2. **Introduction**

3. **Action following previous reviews**

4. **Programmes**
   4.1 Curriculum Design and Development
   4.2 Learning, Teaching and Assessment
   4.3 Student Recruitment, Progression and Achievement
   4.4 Student Support and Guidance
   4.5 Postgraduate Research Degrees
   4.6 Quality Assurance and Enhancement

5. **Acknowledgements**

**Appendices**

- (available on request from the Panel Secretary)

1. **Departmental Self Evaluation Statement and supporting documentation**
SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICE

This summary should be read in conjunction with the paragraphs shown in brackets, where applicable. Action on recommendations should be taken, and a written report of that action received by the Panel Secretary, within THREE MONTHS of the approval by LTQC of this report.

1.1 Conclusion on Quality and Standards

The review panel concludes that, subject to the recommendations below, quality and standards are being achieved in the programmes reviewed, listed below.

The following programmes are offered by the Department and were under consideration at this review:

**Undergraduate programmes**
- BA History of Art (3 years)
- BA History of Art (Asia, Africa and Europe) (3 years) [collaborative programme with UCL]
- BA History of Art and Archaeology (3 years)
- BA History of Art and Archaeology and another subject (3 and 4 years)

**Postgraduate programmes**
- Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate in Asian Art

**Taught Masters Degrees (1 year unless stated)**
- MA Contemporary Art and Art Theory of Asia and Africa
- MA History of Art and Archaeology of East Asia
- MA History of Art and Architecture of the Islamic Middle East
- MA History of Art and/or Archaeology
- MA Religious Arts of Asia
- MA History of Art and Archaeology of East Asia and Intensive Language (2 years)

As part of the School of Arts, the Department shares ownership of two one-year programmes:
- MA Arts of Asia and Africa
- MA Global Creative and Cultural Industries

**Research Degrees**
- PhD (4 years)

1.2 Good Practice

The review panel commends the Department for:

1.2.1 the quality of its modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, which cover a wide range of regional specialisms and theoretical approaches, and offer students the opportunity to gain an impressive breadth and depth of knowledge;

1.2.2 the long-established excellence of the visual dimension of the teaching in all areas (including the creative use of museum resources), as well as the very promising new strength of the department in the teaching of museum studies;

1.2.3 the progress made in the last year towards curriculum reform and the integration of the Department into the School of Arts.
1.3 Recommendations

The review panel recommends the following:

**Necessary action**

The Department should:

1.3.1 consider the development of a more structured curriculum for undergraduate programmes, including core modules for second and third years and clearer progression between the two; and for postgraduate taught programmes, including distinct core modules for each MA (4.2)

1.3.2 review teaching methods and consider whether undergraduate teaching would be enhanced by the more consistent provision of seminar or small-group sessions rather than lectures alone (4.2)

1.3.3 ensure that all information to students is comprehensive, accurate and consistent, and in particular that programme information sets out clearly which modules can and cannot be categorised as ‘archaeological’ for the purposes of degree titling, and why (4.4)

1.3.4 ensure that the PG Diploma in Asian Art is fully integrated into the Department, with particular attention to its quality assurance mechanisms. (4.6.1)

**Advisable action**

The Department is advised to:

1.3.5 consider the inclusion of more frequent and structured contact time for PGR students, especially post-fieldwork (4.5)

1.3.6 include in its discussions around the undergraduate curriculum the possibility of offering significantly more off-site learning such as work placements and archaeological fieldwork (4.4, 4.6.2)

1.3.7 work with the Learning and Teaching Development team to ensure that assessment methods continue to reflect best practice and meet student expectations; and that School-wide guidance around assessment includes sufficient information on methods unique to History of Art. (4.2)

**Matters for attention outside the Department (responsibility shown)**

The Faculty should:

1.3.8 ensure that the PG Diploma in Asian Art is subject to the School’s usual procedures for academic services including quality assurance, and to the usual oversight of those procedures by the Faculty Office and Associate Dean (4.6.1)

1.3.9 continue to support the development of the School of Arts (4.1)

1.3.10 encourage wider attendance at sub-boards of examiners. (4.6.3)

The School is advised to:

1.3.11 communicate with staff of the School of Arts regarding plans for the campus, and the possibility of co-location as a medium-term goal (4.1) (Estates and Facilities)
1.3.12 explore ways to support the personal advisor system, including earlier allocation, and incentives for students to attend meetings such as making access to module sign-up conditional on attendance (4.4) (Senior Tutors).

1.3.13 continue discussions around School policies concerning assessment design and practice, including the question of whether current methods of marking remain viable for large modules (4.6.3) (Registry/LTQC)

2 INTRODUCTION

This Periodic Programme Review was conducted using the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee’s Guidelines for Periodic Programme Review 2015-16. The Department submitted a Self Evaluation Statement (SES) and supporting documentation for consideration by the review panel. In addition, students of the Department made submissions to the review panel.

The LTQC guidelines give the following description of the aims of Periodic Programme Review:

Periodic Programme Reviews [PPRs] provide an opportunity for dialogue between Departments, Faculties and the School as represented by the review panel. Reviews will focus on learning and teaching, and will cover other issues as they impact upon the standard of awards and the quality of the student experience. The panel will need to have seen sufficient evidence to be able to comment in its report on the ‘continuing validity and relevance’ of the programmes under review, and to make targeted and constructive recommendations for improvement and enhancement. Reviews are also one of the ways in which the School learns of exceptionally good practice in individual departments and programmes, and commends it to others.

Participants were reminded of these aims at the start of the session, and of the practice of making recommendations for the Department’s, School’s or Faculty’s attention as thought appropriate by the review panel.

The report is broadly set out using the suggested headings provided in the Guidelines as applied to the Department’s SES. A summary of recommendations and good practice is provided in Section 1 and a copy of the Department’s SES and supporting documentation can be obtained from the Panel Secretary.

3 ACTION FOLLOWING PREVIOUS REVIEWS

The Department was last under review in December 2009. The recommendations of that report were addressed by the then Head of Department and followed up by the appropriate parts of the School. The Panel agreed with the Department that appropriate action had been taken in response to those recommendations, and that in many areas significant improvements could be seen as a result. Some issues had not been fully resolved and were again the subject of discussion, in some cases leading to the recommendations of this report.

The panel noted that there had been significant developments in the department since the time of the last review, including its inclusion in the SOAS School of Arts (see 4.1) and the establishment of the Southeast Asian Art Academic Programme, including several new academic posts and scholarships for postgraduate study.
4 PROGRAMMES

4.1 Curriculum design and development

All the degrees offered by the Department are SOAS awards. The Department currently teaches three undergraduate programmes, one of which, BA History of Art and Archaeology, can also be combined with another subject. All are three-year degrees unless combined with a language, in which case a year abroad can be added. One of the undergraduate programmes, BA History of Art (Asia, Africa and Europe), includes modules taught by UCL. The Department offers a Postgraduate Certificate and a Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art, along with seven Masters degrees, one of which can also be combined with an Intensive Language (Japanese, Korean or Arabic) in a two-year MA. From 2016-17 there will be an additional 2-year programme with Intensive Arabic.

The panel recognised that the department continued to provide a varied and coherent portfolio of high-quality degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level. This view was supported by reports from Visiting Examiners over the period under review, which referred for instance to “world-leading teaching and scholarship” and programmes on which students “enjoy a rich and stimulating experience”. The Department is currently undertaking a curriculum review, and the panel was impressed by the work done to maintain the quality of the degrees whilst adapting to a variety of changes to context including concerns around falling recruitment and sustainability.

The panel had concerns, however, over the extent to which the Department could justify the inclusion of ‘and Archaeology’ in the title of its BA and MA programmes. The department gave a coherent and persuasive explanation for retaining the term in the name of the Department, emphasising that a significant portion of their research and, to a lesser extent, teaching, did cover subjects which were better defined as archaeology than history of art (for instance where they related to prehistoric artefacts), and that staff, and occasionally students, were engaged in archaeological fieldwork. However, the panel heard from students that their expectations of degrees titled ‘History of Art and Archaeology’ had not been fully met; they associated Archaeology with practical skills training and fieldwork, and had anticipated a more equal split between the two areas of study. It was also clear that the degrees in History of Art and Archaeology did not currently meet the national Subject Benchmark Statement for Archaeology. It was the panel’s view that although this had clearly been discussed at length and on several occasions by the staff of the department, their conclusions had not been adequately communicated to students or prospective applicants.

The panel noted that a particular concern of the Department was its integration in the SOAS School of Arts, created in 2012 as an overarching structure also including the Department of Music and Centre for Media Studies. The last year had seen considerable acceleration in the establishment of the School of Arts as a coherent teaching unit, with the creation of two Masters programmes to which the Department of the History of Art and Archaeology contributes, and the development of four interdisciplinary modules which would be included throughout the undergraduate degrees from 2016-17. These would initially be core in Year 1 and optional in Years 2/3. Other elements of integration were planned, including a single sub-board of examiners in the current year, and cross-School appointment to academic tutor roles in the future.

The panel heard that the SoA was currently supported by a Project Officer on a fixed-term basis, as well as a student support officer in the Faculty Office. Staff of History of Art and Archaeology felt strongly that the further development of the School of Arts was dependent both on the continuation of the Project Officer post, and on relocation of office space so that academic staff could be based in a single location (with their overwhelming preference being for this to be within the Brunei Gallery building). There was enthusiasm for the inclusion of teaching and social space alongside this, though the panel recognised the logistical issues given the particular requirements of each department for specialist teaching space, and the general lack of capacity for expanding social space beyond what was planned for the Senate House North Block. The panel heard differing accounts of the status of these plans, and
wished to recommend that the School’s Directorate of Estates and Facilities communicate clearly with the Department and Faculty as to what can be expected.

4.2 Learning, teaching and assessment

Comments from visiting examiners led the panel to conclude that the Department made good use of the BLE in many of its modules. Comparison between this assessment and comments from students relating to inconsistency of BLE use across modules suggested that the time taken to make best use of this resource was worthwhile in terms of both the satisfaction and achievement of students. Attention to the consistency of information across modules needs to be kept in mind in all future curriculum planning.

It appeared to be the case that in the second and subsequent years of the Department’s undergraduate degrees, modules were delivered via lectures alone, either with no supporting seminar or discussion group, or with discussion included as the second half of a two-hour lecture, without splitting into smaller groups. Students found this unhelpful and it contributed to their sense that they did not get to know their peers well, and were under-prepared for higher levels of study.

Although the Department’s self-evaluation statement refers to progression through the undergraduate degree as ‘an important goal’, the panel felt that it was currently not well supported by the programme structure. The first year is highly structured, with ninety credits of core courses including a thirty credit “Theories and Methods” module and four fifteen credit introductory regional modules. Thereafter the programme becomes considerably less rigid, with a very wide range of optional modules which can be taken in year 2 or 3. The ISP is compulsory for all final year students, but students can otherwise choose freely from an extensive list of modules at levels 5 and 6. The panel heard from undergraduate students that this lack of structure made transition from first to second year particularly challenging. They expressed enthusiasm for the idea of a second year core module, which would provide a point of contact with the rest of their cohort. An additional benefit to a well-designed module could be to provide some initial research skills training ahead of the compulsory ISP in the final year, which students currently felt was lacking.

Similar issues arose in discussions of the department’s postgraduate taught portfolio. The Masters degrees, very unusually, do not have core modules, and there is sufficient overlap in optional modules that it is possible for students to take an identical pattern of taught modules and graduate with different degree titles. Students expressed the view that they did not receive sufficient academic guidance to enable them comfortably to negotiate this lack of structure. Again, the panel felt that a core module for each programme (which could potentially share the teaching of some appropriate content around research skills and methodology) could address both the lack of structure and the issue raised by some students that they felt insufficiently prepared for the demands of a Masters level dissertation.

Student comments around assessment were largely focused on the ‘slide tests’ which account for up to 25% of the assessment of some modules. Students felt that this method of assessment, which at SOAS is unique to this department, was as a result under-supported in terms of preparation and guidance. They had experienced variation for which they had not been prepared (for example, some modules/teachers expected a greater degree of analysis as opposed to pure identification). There was dissatisfaction with the practice of undertaking this form of assessment in class, rather than under exam conditions.

4.3 Student recruitment, progression and achievement

The Department has shown a small decline in recruitment at undergraduate level over the period under review, and conversely a rise in recruitment to postgraduate programmes, both taught and research. The rise in applications to Masters programmes was linked by the department to the restructuring of the degrees to allow for more regional specialisation, but this had the effect of very rapid growth in some areas, with the most popular modules tending
to become overcrowded. The panel referred the Department to the practice in some institutions of capping module enrolments, perhaps with priority given to final year students, but recognised that this would be a radical departure for SOAS and require some careful amendments to marketing strategy.

The Department expressed the view that the division of responsibilities between its own admissions tutors, and professional service staff in the Student Recruitment and Admissions teams was not always as clear as it might be. It was notable that staff of the Department contributed to the promotion of the programme, and to the retention of applicants between offer and arrival, but did not feel that they always had the data to support their attempts. The School’s CRM system would facilitate the Department’s work in this area, but staff had not yet received sufficient information about its implementation.

4.4 Student support and guidance

The number of students on some of the most popular courses, and their expectations of personalised feedback and guidance, meant that at some points of the academic year there was considerable strain on course convenors and year tutors. The panel heard from students that they would welcome more detailed information about courses, and that this needed to be available well ahead of the course sign-up period. The maintenance of web-based information was one of several apparently non-academic tasks currently assigned to academic members of the department. Undergraduate students also expressed the feeling that they had lacked accurate information on assessment, with deadlines, word limits and marking criteria mentioned specifically. They were familiar with their Personal Advisors, though they would have appreciated their earlier allocation to assist with induction and settling in. Students whom the panel met had attended a Staff/Student Forum but had limited confidence in the readiness of departmental staff to resolve some of the organisational issues raised.

Training in study skills had been embedded into some undergraduate modules, in particular in the first year, to address what was seen as an increasing gap between A Level and undergraduate expectations. This was seen by the panel as a welcome initiative, which the department might wish to include in its discussions around curriculum: the extension of both generic and subject-specific skills training would be beneficial and address many of the student concerns reported to the review.

4.5 Postgraduate research degrees

The panel received a description of the Department’s postgraduate research degree, and met with a number of research students. A review of the MPhil year undertaken shortly after the previous review had enhanced this provision, providing students with a more coherent introduction to research via a dedicated Research Skills module, initially within the Department and from 2015 across the School of Arts. This also had the benefit of creating a focus point for each cohort. The students also expressed considerable appreciation of their participation in the Research Skills Intercollegiate Network [ReSkIN] which brought them together with students of other London colleges. The panel welcomed these initiatives, and noted that, along with School-wide changes to policy, they had had a welcome impact on completion rates. It was felt that this good practice could beneficially be extended to students returning from fieldwork, whose contact with staff and fellow students is relatively limited. Two presentations are required in the third year, one to the first year research skills seminar and one to other third years, and whilst these were very welcome, the panel wondered whether students would benefit from increased expectations for frequent attendance, at regular events such as the departmental seminar series or a writing-up workshop. Consideration could be given to introducing a student-led research seminar at which graduate students could present their own work as well as inviting visiting speakers.
4.6 Quality assurance and enhancement

4.6.1 Use of internal QA procedures and external reference points

The documentation of the Department’s submission was substantially complete, and the panel found the Self-Evaluation Statement extremely helpful. Programme specifications were received for the taught programmes under review, the content of which was appropriate, although it did not reflect the most recent change of programme titles in every case.

Monitoring of learning outcomes is via Annual Programme Review, and the panel saw evidence that this had been completed for each programme and each year over the period under review, and that it was in the main an effective process which the Department carried out in a timely and reflective way.

The panel noted that the Postgraduate Diploma (and Certificate) in Asian Art remained a thriving and successful element of the Department’s provision, and of considerable value as a recruitment channel. Given this, it was under-represented by the outputs of quality assurance procedures included in the submission: no annual programme reviews or visiting examiner reports were received for the PGDip, although the self-evaluation statement made reference to their completion. The programme does not appear to have a specification. The Department reported that there were plans for the better integration of processes from the current session. Nevertheless, the panel felt that better progress should have been made in this area, given the recommendations of the previous review to both the Department (which “should ensure that the PG Diploma in Asian Art is fully integrated into the Department, with particular attention to its quality assurance mechanisms”) and the Faculty (which was advised to “ensure that the PG Diploma in Asian Art is subject to the School’s usual procedures for Annual Programme Review and External Examination, and to the usual oversight of those procedures by the Faculty Office and Associate Dean.”)

4.6.2 Student Feedback

Feedback from students in the Department is obtained primarily via course evaluation forms. The panel observed that the Department used the term Staff/Student Forum to refer to meetings of staff with student representatives. A dedicated, termly meeting of this group was considered good practice, though it was noted that the SSF terminology is used elsewhere to describe (and might therefore be understood by students as meaning) an open meeting to which all students were invited, which was not the practice in HAA. The panel concluded from the SEC and NSS results included in the Department’s submission that the majority of students were satisfied with the teaching they had received.

Students whom the panel met expressed frustration with a lack of clarity in some of the information they received, especially around the definition of ‘Archaeology’ in degree titles. The panel considered that the department could very easily improve the programme and module descriptions provided online, for instance to indicate more clearly which modules were ‘designated as having archaeological content’ (and which should therefore be taken by students wishing to graduate with a BA History of Art and Archaeology). Although students found it difficult to distinguish clearly between modules which did and did not fit this category, their impression was that there was less archaeological content available than they had expected at the point of application. They expressed considerable enthusiasm for the introduction of practical skills training or fieldwork, which they felt could be used to redress the balance.

4.6.3 External Examining System

Visiting Examiners’ reports were received for the Department’s programmes over the period under review, and the panel was satisfied that Visiting Examiners were employed appropriately in the examination process, although responses to them had in some cases been inconsistent. The panel noted the visiting examiner’s perception that attendance at the
department's sub-boards of examiners was lower than expected, and staff whom they met
confirmed that this was not considered a high priority. External panel members agreed with
comments made by Visiting Examiners that the extent to which double-marking was used at
SOAS was considerable in comparison to other institutions, and that increasing student
numbers might mean considerations of staff workload would soon outweigh the advantages of
this policy.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The review panel would like to express its thanks to all of the Department's staff and students
who took part in this review, and to all Faculty and other School officers who attended or
otherwise assisted. In particular, the review panel would like to thank Professor Contadini and
her colleagues in the Department and Faculty for the considerable time spent in producing the
SES and supporting documentation.