

# School of Informatics

## Response to Quinquennial Review Recommendations

The School thanks the Panel for the commendations contained in its report, and for the constructive nature of its recommendations. We respond to each of the recommendations below, in the order in which they appear in the report.

### **Taught Masters provision**

1. The Panel **recommends** that the School revisits the provision of feedback to students. As there appears to be no School guidance on feedback provision the Panel recommends that a framework/schedule of feedback provision is devised and included in the handbook given to students.

*(This misquotes the recommendation in the report, which said that students appear to be unaware of School guidance on feedback provision.) The existing policy, which is that feedback should normally be provided within two weeks of submission, will be included in the MSc handbook. There is an ongoing problem of adherence to this policy, and this will continue to be pursued with the members of staff concerned. We are reviewing our approach to assessment and coursework will be included in that review. We believe our students are required to do too many assessments. If we reduce the number of assignments we can work to improve the timeliness and quality of feedback.*

2. The Panel **recommends** that the School considers ways to include more organised team/ group working and problem solving perhaps through the tutorial provision.

*We are investigating the provision of group projects that could be undertaken by several students. We are also considering having a tutorial group that runs through the entire year to support the IRR and IRP courses, and this may be an appropriate forum for such activities.*

3. The School should **address** the issue of the ‘quiet lab’ and to take steps to ensure that this functions as a quiet working area.

*There are designated quiet labs on Appleton Tower level 5 that are clearly labelled as such. We will ensure that such notices are clear and prominent. Our experience is that students enforce such policies themselves. This issue arises primarily from a decision to reorganise the labs to increase space in quiet labs – it took students some time to realise the change had taken place. The quiet labs are quiet now.*

4. The Panel noted the enhanced information provision and **recommends** that the inclusion of advanced information on programming skills to facilitate student preparation would be a very constructive addition to the overall recruitment and induction provision. In the longer term the introduction of an e-learning package/course should be **considered**.

*We have plans to prepare an online version of our “Introduction to Java Programming” course. This should be available for 2008-9 intake.*

5. The Panel **recommends** that the School revisits the presentation of the course information on the web. The Panel **recommends** that the major and minor courses for each specialism are more clearly linked on the listing so that the students can identify a clear pathway to follow. The advance publication of course descriptors would assist the students to choose their specialism pathway.

*We agree that the course information on the web is in need of improvement and will try to make it clearer. This specific suggestion is one possible improvement that we will consider.*

6. The Panel **recommends** that PG representatives in each specialism should be elected during the course induction period. The names and role of these representatives should be clearly advertised on the main programme webpage and the email channels available for communication should be improved. It is suggested that the School liaise with EUSA regarding possible training for new representatives.

*We believe these reps were elected early in semester 1 but we do need to improve their visibility and training – we will address this as soon as practicable.*

## **Research degree provision**

7. The School’s stated procedure to review progress at 9 months was not rigorously adhered to. The Panel **requires** that a clear and robust procedure for First Year Review is defined. This issue **must be addressed** prior to the next round of performance reviews.
8. The Panel also **requires** that criteria for the conduct of Annual Reviews **must** also be defined to ensure consistency of rigour of the review, improve the level of constructive feedback to the students and improve the level of fairness of treatment across the institutes.
9. The level and effectiveness of feedback to research students was not consistent across the Institutes. The Panel **recommends** that the School defines criteria/principles to guide the provision of feedback and look to ensuring that feedback is routinely carried out at the formal review milestones.

*(We are addressing these three recommendations as a group.) We acknowledge that there is significant variation across Institutes in Informatics at present in the way that progress reviews are conducted. This will be addressed once we have moved into the new Informatics building, where it is anticipated that reviews will be organised by the Graduate School centrally rather than by the individual Institutes as at present. Discussion within the School is necessary to agree procedures, but there will be a clear review timetable (with the first review point at 9 months or earlier) and explicit guidelines that will take into account best practice.*

10. The Panel **recommends** that the School requires all research students to undertake the University's Teaching and Demonstrating course prior to taking becoming a tutor. The School should investigate developing mechanisms to feed back comments on performance to the research students.

*The Informatics Teaching Organisation already requires this, see: <http://www.inf.ed.ac.uk/admin/ITO/tut-dem-jobs.html> - the relevant text there is: "The TLA Centre and the School of Informatics provide the following training materials and training courses. **New tutors and demonstrators are required to attend a relevant training course for which you will be paid at the demonstrator rate.**" Our feeling is that although the "generic" training is useful and appropriate, we should be running some in-house training that takes account of the discipline.*

11. The Panel **recommends** that the School investigates the level of computer support for specialised software not standard to the School's provision.

*The specific student comment was that computing staff were not willing to support specialised software installed by students. This is an unrealistic expectation because of manpower limitations on one hand, in view of the huge range of specialised software in question, and the need to maintain a robust service on the other. Computing support policies are clearly documented and PhD students are already invited to attend meetings at which future computing support priorities are discussed.*

12. The Panel **recommends** that the School should look at ways to facilitate increased social and informal interaction and contact between students across the Institutes.

*We are taking advantage of Roberts funding allocation to Schools to increase the frequency of events allowing interaction between research students across Informatics. This will be a particular priority once we have moved into the new Informatics building. Co-location will already be a giant step towards addressing this issue.*

## **Management and operation of Graduate School**

13. The Panel **asks** the School to formally review its current practice of recruiting students without a clearly defined project plan and allowing definition of a project to take up to 12 months. The School is **required** to submit a formal Report to the Panel.

*We strongly feel that learning to identify a research topic is part of research training in Informatics, and this is also the view in our peer departments within the UK and internationally. In most cases, a specific topic area is identified at the time of application for a PhD, and we supply and maintain a list of suggestions on the web. The first year is generally devoted to focussing on a specific topic within the chosen area, conducting preliminary investigations including a literature survey, and addressing any relevant training needs. The latter is more of a problem in Informatics than in most other discipline within the College: there is no generally-agreed standard for the content of a first degree in Informatics, Computer Science, Cognitive Science etc., so our intake is more diverse than elsewhere. The degree of interdisciplinarity in Informatics research is a further factor.*

*That said, we agree that the work of some students during the first year is less productive than it could be. To address this, and in pursuit of the aim of decreasing average time to completion and achieving the target of a defined project topic by the end of month 9 (see recommendation 7 above), we plan to introduce a more structured approach to the first year of PhD studies, with clearly-defined goals and milestones.*

14. The Panel **recommends** that the School investigates mechanisms to secure funding for students who are required to have to continue with full study after 36 months.

*Some funding sources already provide funding for 42 months (EPSRC DTA, our largest single funding source) or 48 months (various overseas sources). The School already provides a wide range of opportunities for PhD students to earn money by contributing to teaching or other activities, and Informatics students are generally able to find other ways of earning money. At present our PhD student numbers are strictly limited by availability of funding, and the direct consequence of providing funding for students for a longer period is to decrease PhD student numbers. We acknowledge that the situation is not ideal and our strenuous efforts to seek new funding sources will continue, but our first priority will be to find funding for increasing student numbers rather than more generously funding a smaller number of students.*

15. In the meantime, the Panel **recommends** that, if the expectation of the School is that no project can be completed in less than the maximum period of study, then the School's practice **must** be transparent and published to potential students in advance of application and the acceptance of the offer.

*The School's expectation is **not** that no project can be completed in less than the maximum period of study. This was never suggested, and many students submit well within this period. The actual issue here is a divergence between the expectation of students (completion within 39-40 months) and staff (completion often requiring up to 48 months). Our average time to completion is in line with that of PhD students in other 5\* departments in the UK. We will make it clearer to potential students that completion typically requires more than the prescribed period. We will consider adding a sentence to funding offer letters indicating that completion within the funded period is often not achieved, and funding to cover any additional time is not guaranteed.*

16. If the School wishes to continue to support the 48 months then the Panel **recommends** that they take formal steps to adopt the 1 + 3 model as standard. However the Panel does **recommend** that the School considers carefully the implications of four years fees on the attractiveness of the degree(s) to potential students and overseas governments. If the 1+ 3 is adopted as the standard degree then the School's funding **must** cover the four years.

*Funding for the 1+3 model is only available from funding agencies in a minority of special cases. We do take advantage of such funding when it is available, e.g. the Doctoral Training Centre in Neuroinformatics. We do not believe that the 1+3 model is a realistic goal in the absence of funding to cover this period.*

17. To assist with timely completion the Panel **recommends** that the School considers adopting the additional year three review stage (or a variation of) suggested by the External Assessor.

*This is a very interesting suggestion and we will consider it in designing the review framework described in response to recommendations 7-9.*

18. The Panel **noted** that in reality it was the informal mechanisms for research student representation liaison that were working well. The Panel would **recommend** that the School reviews its current formal processes for staff/ student liaison to ensure that the committee can operate effectively and contribute to the development of the research training provision.

*We will review these processes.*

19. The Panel were concerned that some aspects of the examinations and marking procedures for the MSc by Research in Neuroinformatics were not fully compliant with University's regulations. The Panel **recommends** that the Teaching Organisation reviews the practices to check on compliance.

*We will review these practices and ensure that they comply with the University's regulations.*

20. The Panel **noted** the very valuable and extensive contribution of the current masters Programme Director. The Panel **recommends** that the School begins to consider the succession arrangements to allow a reasonable period of crossover and continuity.

*This is in hand. We are considering moving towards having a period of overlap for all major administrative roles, including this one. With the full integration of PGT courses under the ITO we will explore the role to see if the ITO can support it more effectively and will search for candidate replacements. If ITO can take over some of the more routine aspects of the Programme Director this will make it easier to recruit a replacement.*