

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE REVALIDATION PANEL FOR UNIT 5J: MSc Leadership and Innovation in the Public Sector (Part-time) (Joint Ulster University and Atlantic Technological University (ATU) (Donegal))

8 April 2022

PANEL: Professor D Barr, Head of School of Education, Ulster University [Chair]
Dr A Boyd, Senior Lecturer, School of Engineering, Ulster University
Dr J Gallagher, Head of Faculty of Science and Health, Atlantic Technological University
Dr B Connaughton, Lecturer in Public Administration, Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick
Dr D Shaw, Assistant Professor in Information Systems, Nottingham University Business School

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs A Garland, Academic Policy and Standards Officer, Academic Office, Ulster University

APOLOGIES: Ms G Boyle, Vice-President (Education), Ulster University Students' Union
Mr A O'Flaherty, Students' Union President, Atlantic Technological University

1 INTRODUCTION

The Panel met to consider the revalidation of MSc Leadership and Innovation in the Public Sector offered jointly by Ulster University's Department of Global Business and Enterprise and the Department of Business Studies at Atlantic Technological University (Donegal). The programme leads to a joint Ulster University (UU) / Atlantic Technological University (ATU) award. All participants register with, and are students of, both universities and students must be in current employment in a Public Service Department. The programme consists of six 20 credit-point taught modules at Level 7 and one 60 credit-point Research Project module. All modules are compulsory. The taught modules are delivered in two-day blocks, supported by additional online material, followed by an Action Learning Set four to six weeks later. Four of the six taught modules are delivered off campus using a residential delivery method at venues in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The first and last taught modules are delivered at the Magee campus of Ulster University and at the Donegal campus of Atlantic Technological University respectively. Intake to the programme is in January.

The Panel initially met with the joint Course Directors (Dr T Cullen (also Revalidation Unit Co-ordinator) and Dr V O'Rourke), the Associate Dean (Education) of Ulster University Business School (Professor H Farley), the Head of Department of Global Business and Enterprise at UU (Professor S Moffett), the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar at ATU (Dr B Bennett), the Head of Faculty of Business at ATU (Mr M Margey) and the Head of Department of Business at ATU (Ms P Doherty). The provision was then discussed in more detail with the Course Team.

2 DOCUMENTATION

The Panel received the following documentation in advance of the meeting:

- (i) course submission;
- (ii) Ulster University's Guidelines for Revalidation Panels;
- (iii) QAA Master's Degree Characteristics Statement (2020);
- (iv) QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Master's Degrees in Business and Management (2015);
- (v) external examiner reports for 2019/20 and 2020/21;
- (vi) 'Curriculum Design at Ulster' document;
- (vii) preliminary comments from Panel members (CA7);
- (viii) Assessment rubrics for each module and feedback from Ms C Murphy (CHERP);
- (ix) Ulster University's Academic Office notes on regulatory and standards matters.

3 MEETING WITH SENIOR STAFF

3.1 HOW THE PROGRAMME FITS WITHIN THE OVERALL STRATEGY OF EACH UNIVERSITY

The Panel began by asking the senior staff how the programme fitted within the overall strategy of each university. The UU senior staff explained that the MSc Leadership and Innovation in the Public Sector programme was part of Ulster University Business School's specialist provision, catering for the needs of a particular market. The programme had run successfully for almost 20 years and this was the Business School's only joint programme. The Panel was informed by ATU's senior staff that practice-based postgraduate education was a large part of ATU's Business Faculty's identity and that this provision was part of a suite of professional development programmes. The cross-border dimension was an important aspect of ATU's strategy for its Donegal campus. This was therefore a strategically important programme involving successful collaboration with Ulster University, as well as government partners, with relationships having been established not only at programme level, but also at research level.

3.2 OVERALL MANAGEMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

The Panel asked the senior staff to outline how the programme was managed, given that the teaching team was spread across the two universities. The senior staff explained that the provision was delivered as a joint programme. The Head of Department of Global Business and Enterprise at UU and the Head of Department of Business at ATU were responsible for the allocation of module coordinators and each university had a course director. The senior staff advised that regular meetings of the Course Team were held and that members of the Team worked well together. All Team members were involved in the Action Learning Sets, with each member leading a small group. The senior staff stated that it was essential to be well organised and coordinated to meet the expectations of the type of student taking the programme, and that it was testament to the commitment of both universities that the programme recruited successfully every year. Students from both jurisdictions were expected to work together on the programme and the Course Team led by example. Induction and graduation alternated between the two institutions each year.

3.3 INTAKE TO THE PROGRAMME

The Panel enquired how the projected intakes in the revalidation document had been determined and what engagement the Course Team had with key sponsors. The senior staff explained that each institution had a target of approximately 10 – 12 students each year and that there was a large amount of repeat business from various government departments and agencies each year. The programme was not openly marketed as it had been designed for this target audience. In the current academic year there were 24 students on the programme, which was the maximum cohort size for this programme. The senior staff confirmed that the minimum cohort size was 12 students.

The Panel noted from the information provided in the revalidation document that not all students had graduated and queried why this was the case. The senior staff advised that all students leaving the programme early did so because of personal or workload reasons and that these students often returned to complete the programme at a later date.

3.4 FEEDBACK

The Panel enquired what mechanisms were in place to gather feedback from students and if any examples of feedback were available. The senior staff explained that, as the programme had a January intake and was completed in 18 months, it did not align with the normal academic year and annual feedback processes. Formal feedback was therefore gathered at the end of each module. The Panel was informed that feedback was gathered using a number of methods.

3.4.1 Informal Feedback

Given the small cohort of approximately 20 students each year, and the use of the block delivery method, staff were able to establish good relationships with students and feedback was often gained informally through discussion.

3.4.2 Written Feedback

The Panel was informed that at the end of each module, students were provided with paper copies of bespoke feedback sheets and that feedback was gathered from each student. Students were asked for their views on all aspects of the programme such as guest speakers, residential facilities, highlights of the provision and any aspects that might be improved. In the past, students had commended, *inter alia*, the broad range of reading resources, the interactive nature of delivery and the opportunities for networking. Shorter breaks between teaching sessions on the two-day block session had been requested. The feedback from each module was fed forward into the next module.

3.4.3 Survey every Five Years

In addition to the above methods of obtaining feedback, a survey of participants was carried out every five years as part of the preparation for revalidation. This involved the use of focus groups, interviews and surveying all participants from the past five cohorts. The Panel was directed to some of the comments received from students which had been included in Section A of the revalidation document.

The Chair thanked the senior staff for their candid and clear answers.

4 MEETING WITH STUDENTS

The Panel met with a group of students comprising representatives from different cohorts who were employed in various government departments and agencies across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

4.1 RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING THE PROGRAMME

The Panel enquired why the students had chosen this programme of study. Reasons given for choosing this programme included:

- to gain insight and experience required for promotion to senior management posts;
- for personal development;
- to enhance leadership skills and learn how to apply these skills and motivate people in the workplace;
- to gain a Master's level qualification;
- the applicability of the modules to the student's role.

One student stated that he had studied at Ulster University before and that the calibre of teaching on the programmes he had studied in the past had been a factor in his decision to take this programme. The flexibility afforded to students in the way the programme was delivered and recommendations from past students had also played an important role.

4.2 WORKLOAD

Given that the students were all employed, the Panel enquired how they managed their workloads. The students responded as follows:

- support of family;
- support of managers and time off work to complete assignments;
- the block delivery of modules;
- flexibility of the programme and the space between modules which enabled students to reflect on what they had learned in each module;
- the requirement to complete the assignment for a module before the next module started;
- time saved on commuting to work due to the pandemic and working from home.

4.3 ASSESSMENT METHODS

The Panel sought the students' views on the assessment methods employed within the programme. The students stated that, although all modules were assessed by a 4,000-word assignment, there was variety in that students could choose their own title in some of the modules, while others were more prescriptive. There was also a good balance between assignments focusing on personal learning and how this could be applied in the workplace and those with a more academic / theoretical focus.

4.4 STUDENT SUPPORT AND ONLINE LEARNING

The Panel asked how the students felt supported to progress to the final project element of the programme and how their experience had been impacted by having to learn online

instead of face-to-face during the pandemic. One of the students who had taken all of the programme online so far stated that communication with tutors was good and that staff were always happy to engage with students and replied in a timely manner to emails. Although communication within the Action Learning Set was also good, the student stated that he had missed out on networking opportunities and felt that the students within the Action Learning Set did not really know each other. The students were unanimous in the view that face-to-face learning was preferable to online learning but stated that excellent resources had been provided for each module taken online and that staff had been very supportive and approachable. Feedback gathered from other students by one of the students meeting with the Panel included issues such as difficulty around communication with staff and confusion arising out of having to use two different VLEs with different log-in details. The students present at the revalidation meeting had not however experienced any such issues.

One of the students who had completed the programme pre-pandemic, reported that getting to know all of his colleagues had been invaluable and that he still kept in touch with them. The student had found it challenging to meet the end of January deadline for submission of the project and suggested that consideration be given to extending the deadline into February.

4.5 HOW LEARNING HAS BEEN APPLIED

The Panel asked the students to provide examples of how they had applied what they had learned in the workplace. One student stated that the academic underpinning gained through the programme had given him more confidence and that the use of the Active Learning Set structure in his workplace had promoted team bonding. Another student reported using what had been learned in the programme to bring about cultural change in the workplace, while others reported applying their learning in small ways in their day-to-day role or using their project to inspire change.

The Chair thanked the students for their engagement with the Panel and for their contribution to the revalidation process.

5 MEETING WITH COURSE TEAM

The Panel met with the Course Team, which comprised representatives from ATU and UU.

5.1 PREPARATION FOR REVALIDATION

The Panel asked the Team to outline what preparation had been undertaken for revalidation. The Team explained that the process had started at the beginning of 2021 and involved monthly Team meetings, the use of focus groups and surveys to gather feedback, and consultation with past and current students. The Team worked with both institutions to ensure that both sets of policies and procedures were satisfied, and liaised with staff in Ulster University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP) to ensure that the programme adhered to the University's Curriculum Design Principles and to design the assessment rubrics. Students had been consulted regarding assessment, as well as online and face-to-face delivery methods. Feedback indicated that students were of the view that the assessment strategy was appropriate and that they preferred face-to-face teaching using residential, as these provided opportunities for networking. All of this feedback had been taken into account when preparing for revalidation.

5.2 DIVERSITY OF STUDENT COHORT

The Panel enquired about gender representation within the student cohort and if there were any issues around diversity. The Team advised that overall it had been a fairly equal gender divide over the years. This year, however, there were only three males in the current cohort, but they participated in discussions. The range of the students' background and employment contributed to the richness of the programme. The Panel was informed that, although the Course Team comprised mostly females, two of the three ATU module coordinators were male and there was a male administrator at ATU and a female administrator at Ulster University.

5.3 CONTENT

5.3.1 Sustainable Development Goals

The Panel enquired how the overarching context of Sustainable Development Goals was addressed within the modules and was informed that this was incorporated through the use of guest speakers from the public and voluntary sectors, and through the reading material specified for each module. Examples were given by the Team of how this was addressed in specific modules, such as the *Change and Cultural Management* module which examined the different types of issues experienced by citizens, causing them to engage with different sectors, and how services could be improved, and in the *Citizen Centric Policy and Service Design* module.

5.3.2 Digital Transformation in the Public Sector

The Panel enquired how the transition of public sector bodies into more data-driven organisations was covered within the programme. The Team advised that module BMG784, previously *Digital Transformation and Shared Services*, had been revised and re-titled *Digital Strategy and Innovation* to reflect the strategic importance of digital transformation in the public sector. The Team explained that shared services were prevalent when this module had originally been developed, but feedback received from students and stakeholders had indicated that digital transformation had become more prevalent, and consequently the focus of the module had shifted to digital strategy.

5.4 REVISIONS TO MODULES

The Panel asked the Team to outline what revisions had been made to the modules between the previous revalidation exercise and the current revalidation exercise. The Team stated that the main change to the programme had been the revision to module BMG784, *Digital Strategy and Innovation*, (previously *Transformation and Shared Services*). The Panel requested that the revisions made to the programme since the last revalidation be articulated more clearly in the revised course document.

5.5 RESEARCH PROJECT

The Team was asked to outline the process for the Research Project. The Team explained that each student was allocated a supervisor and that there was a number of workshops, including a research methods workshop, along with a virtual drop-in clinic. The ethical approval process was undertaken as part of the research methods workshop in March, and targets were set for the different stages of the project. In another workshop which took place

in May / June, the layout of the dissertation was discussed. Former students were invited to come and speak about the project and workload involved, and the projects were submitted in January. Before embarking on the Research Project, students were re-introduced to the databases and resources held by the Library, and librarians were also available to provide one-to-one support.

The Panel sought examples of topics students had chosen for their projects. The Team explained that students could undertake an Action Research Project or an Action Learning Project. Examples of topics included how to manage the increased workload impact of Brexit, the future of finance-shared services in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and transformation of the public sector-shared services delivery. The Team stated that project topics depended on what was topical at the time and what was important to a student's work. A pool of staff was available to supervise the dissertations and supervisors were not limited to members of the Team. The Panel was informed that students produced excellent projects as they undertook a large amount of primary research and interviewed work colleagues.

5.6 ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

The Panel noted that all of the modules were assessed in the same way using a 4,000-word written assignment and queried how this uniformity catered for a variety of different learners. The Team stated that the assessment strategy had been reviewed but, at the request of students, the written assignment had been retained as the assessment method for each module. The Team explained that, as the substantive content of each module differed, each assignment had a different emphasis and that a major selling point of the programme was that all of the assignments were applied to the individual's own work context. The Panel was informed that, in the past, group assignments had been used in the assessment of some modules but that this method of assessment was not popular with students. The module co-ordinators provided examples of the different approaches taken to the assignments in the different modules and the module co-ordinator of the *Context of Leadership, Innovation and Transformation* module, which was the first module taken on the programme, explained that two additional days had been allocated to the module this year to facilitate an assignment drop-in clinic that provided guidance for students on academic writing matters such as referencing. All students had availed of this support and it was hoped that this would also help students with their assignments for other modules.

The Team stated that they had worked closely with CHERP and with the equivalent department at ATU to ensure that the assignments met the guidelines of both institutions. At module level, Ulster University's Curriculum Design Principles had been adopted, with each module having four learning outcomes. The Team explained that the philosophy of the programme was 'learning by doing' and that the programme comprised a rich combination of theory and application. The Team stated that this ethos of the programme was embodied in the assessment strategy.

5.7 LEARNING OUTCOMES

The Panel noted that the programme learning outcome map included in the revalidation document showed that most of the programme learning outcomes were achieved in each of the modules and queried if this was an accurate reflection of what was being assessed in the modules. The Team advised that, as the areas covered by the modules and the programme learning outcomes were both broad, it was to be expected that the learning outcomes would be assessed in multiple modules. This provided synergy within the programme.

The Panel queried how the programme learning outcome (T2), '*Communicate effectively using various media and with a variety of audiences*' was achieved and was advised that students were expected to be able to communicate with teaching staff, with their fellow students in the Action Learning Sets, and to be able to ask intelligent questions, as well as become better listeners. In the Action Learning Sets the students were divided into smaller groups and each group nominated a leader to communicate findings. Students were also expected to participate in VLE discussion forums.

5.8 RESEARCH-INFORMED TEACHING

The Panel enquired how the teaching was informed by research and was advised that members of the Team were research active in their own fields, which fed into their teaching, and that a senior lecturer in teaching and learning had shared practices with the Team. The Panel was impressed with the examples given by the Team members and commended not only the research undertaken in subject areas, but also the fact that pedagogic research informed the delivery of the programme.

5.9 MODULE DELIVERY

The Panel enquired how the Team envisaged the programme being delivered during the 2022/23 academic year, given that teaching had moved online during the pandemic. The Team advised that the mode of delivery for the programme had been discussed and that delivery of all modules would return to face-to-face teaching for 2022/23. The Team explained that the first and last taught modules would be delivered at the Magee campus of UU and the Donegal campus of ATU respectively to provide a 'university experience' for students, and that the other four taught modules would be delivered as residential, using hotels. The Panel was informed that the location of the Action Learning Sets would be selected depending on where students were based and that this was one of the programme's key selling points. During the pandemic students had been offered the opportunity to purchase an iPad to use for e-text books and this practice would continue. Dates of modules were agreed well in advance and students were informed of the dates for the full two years of the programme. The Team was of the view, and feedback from students had confirmed, that the online delivery of modules during the pandemic had resulted in a lesser experience for students with less opportunities for getting to know each other, information sharing and networking. The face-to-face delivery involved students and staff sharing meals together and this aspect of the programme was important in that it provided bonding and networking opportunities, as well as opportunities for students to provide informal feedback.

5.10 POSTGRADUATE DIPLOMA EXIT AWARD

The Panel noted that there was a Postgraduate Diploma exit award and enquired if many students exited at this point. The Team advised that to date no one had left with the exit award.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the following aspects of the provision:

- (i) the innovative use of, and research carried out around, the Action Learning Set; the Panel is of the view that this aspect of the programme should be promoted more;
- (ii) the overall coherence of the Team's approach and the collegiate approach adopted in response to issues raised by the Panel;
- (iii) the quality of the revalidation documentation;
- (iv) the longevity and success of the programme;
- (v) the very strong student satisfaction, the flexibility afforded to students, application of learning and clear progression planning for students.

The Revalidation Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the programme be re-approved for a period of five years (intakes 2022/23 – 2026/27), subject to the conditions and recommendations of the Panel being addressed, and a satisfactory response and revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by **Friday, 27th May 2022** for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Conditions

- (i) that all of the points raised by the Academic Office in the Appendix be addressed;
- (ii) that a review of the assessment strategy be undertaken with a view to incorporating greater variety of assessment methods (which may include, for example, formative or summative presentations / assessment of ALS activities that are currently not assessed);
- (iii) that the approach taken by the Team to the revalidation process and revisions made to the programme be articulated more clearly in the revalidation document, along with how Ulster University's Integrated Curriculum Design Framework has been incorporated within the provision.

Recommendations

- (i) that a section explaining the process for gathering student feedback and how the Team has responded to feedback be included in the revalidation document;
- (ii) that the currency of the core reading texts in all of the module reading lists be reviewed.

7 APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Panel members for their valuable contribution to the revalidation process and thanked the Team members from both institutions for their engagement and the time and effort involved in preparing the excellent revalidation documentation. The Chair congratulated the Team on the quality of the documentation.

The Chair and the Panel members were also thanked by Professor Farley, Professor Moffett and Ms Doherty for the positive and constructive experience. Professor Moffett also thanked colleagues at ATU.