



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Subject Review Report

January 2001 Q135/2001

University of Keele

Philosophy

Reviewing the Quality of Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997. It has responsibility for assessing the quality of higher education (HE) in England and Northern Ireland from 1 October 1997 under the terms of a contract with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The purposes of subject review are: to ensure that the public funding provided is supporting education of an acceptable quality, to provide public information on that education through the publication of reports such as this one, and to provide information and insights to encourage improvements in education.

The main features of the subject review method are:

Review against Aims and Objectives

The HE sector in England and Northern Ireland is diverse. The HEFCE funds education in over 140 institutions of HE and 75 further education (FE) colleges. These institutions vary greatly in size, subject provision, history and statement of purpose. Each has autonomy to determine its institutional mission, and its specific aims and objectives at subject level.

Subject review is carried out in relation to the subject aims and objectives set by each provider. It measures the extent to which each subject provider is successful in achieving its aims and objectives.

Readers should be cautious in making comparisons of subject providers solely on the basis of subject review outcomes. Comparisons between providers with substantively different aims and objectives would have little validity.

Review of the Student Learning Experience and Student Achievement

Subject review examines the wide range of influences that shape the learning experiences and achievements of students. It covers the full breadth of teaching and learning activities, including: direct observation of classroom/seminar/workshop/ laboratory situations, the methods of reviewing students' work, students' work and achievements, the curriculum, staff and staff development, the application of resources (library, information technology, equipment), and student support and guidance. This range of activities is captured within a core set of six aspects of provision, each of which is graded on a four-point scale (1 to 4), in ascending order of merit.

The aspects of provision are:

- Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment
- Student Progression and Achievement
- Student Support and Guidance
- Learning Resources
- Quality Management and Enhancement.

Peer Review

Reviewers are academic and professional peers in the subject. Most are members of the academic staff of UK HE institutions. Others are drawn from industry, commerce, private practice and the professions.

Combination of Internal and External Processes

The review method has two main processes:

- Preparation by the subject provider of a self-assessment in the subject, based on the provider's own aims and objectives, and set out in the structure provided by the core set of aspects of provision.
- A three-day review visit carried out by a team of reviewers. The review team grades each of the aspects of provision to make a graded profile of the provision, and derives from that profile an overall judgement. Provided that each aspect is graded 2 or better, the quality of the education is approved.

Published Reports

In addition to individual review reports, the QAA will publish subject overview reports at the conclusion of reviews in a subject. The subject overview reports are distributed widely to schools and FE colleges, public libraries and careers services. Both the review reports and the subject overview reports are available in hard copy and are also on the world-wide web (see back cover for details).

Introduction

1. This Report presents the findings of a review in January 2001 of the quality of education in philosophy provided by the University of Keele.
2. The University College of North Staffordshire, founded in 1949, attained university status as Keele University in 1962. The University is situated on a self-contained rural campus in Staffordshire. There are some 5000 full-time undergraduates, and some 1,500 postgraduates, of whom about half study part-time. Most undergraduate degrees are dual honours courses, with each principal course contributing equally to the final degree.
3. Philosophy is taught within the Department of Philosophy, which, in September 2000, was merged with the Department of English to form the School of English and Philosophy. In January 2000, over 250 students were registered for philosophy on undergraduate programmes and 150 on taught postgraduate programmes. Of the undergraduates, some 63.5 per cent were taking philosophy as a principal course of a dual honours degree, 6.5 per cent were taking the Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) degree, and 30 per cent were taking philosophy as a subsidiary course. All postgraduates, except one, were studying part-time. There are eight members of academic staff and five support staff serving the subject.
4. The following provision forms the basis of the review:
 - Philosophy as a principal course in BA Dual Honours with another discipline
 - Philosophy as a principal course in BA Honours PPE
 - Philosophy as a subsidiary course
 - Diploma/MA Medical Ethics and Law
 - Diploma/MA in the Ethics of Social Welfare
 - Diploma/MA in the Ethics of Cancer and Palliative Care
5. The statistical data in this Introduction are provided by the institution itself. The aims and objectives for philosophy are presented overleaf. These also are provided by the institution.

The Aims and Objectives for Philosophy

Undergraduate teaching

Aims:

The principal aims of the Department's undergraduate programme are:

1. to provide students with a high-quality university education in several central areas of philosophy and thus gain a substantial knowledge of a range of philosophical traditions and classical texts;
2. to provide students with the skills needed to deploy sound argument; to identify underlying issues; and to detect fallacies and other weaknesses;
3. to provide students with the study and writing skills required of a university graduate;
4. to provide students with an adequate basis in both knowledge and skills for possible further work in the subject.

Objectives:

Students graduating in philosophy should possess:

- an understanding of a selection of philosophical views and traditions, and the argumentative strategies they employ;
- abilities to comprehend, analyse and interpret complex philosophical texts and theoretical arguments;
- the ability to assess critically the cogency of arguments and the purported validity of inferences;
- the ability to develop and defend arguments, to evaluate and respond to criticism, and, where appropriate, to modify those arguments;
- specialised skills in conceptual analysis and in written presentation.

Postgraduate teaching

Aims:

The principal aims of the programme are:

- to provide students, almost all of whom are professionals employed in health care or the social services, with deeper critical and analytical skills and with knowledge of a range of theoretical positions in ethics which can be applied fruitfully to ethical problems and dilemmas which they encounter in their professional work;
- to provide students with an adequate basis in both knowledge and study skills for further work in the subject;
- to enhance the communication skills of students which they can bring back to their professional work.

Objectives:

The objectives set for the postgraduate diplomas are that students who obtain one of the diplomas should have acquired the following:

- an understanding of certain ethical theories and traditions, and the argumentative strategies these employ;
- abilities to comprehend, analyse and interpret complex philosophical texts and theoretical arguments in the area of applied ethics;
- the ability to assess critically the cogency of ethical arguments;
- the capacity to develop and defend ethical arguments, to evaluate and respond to criticism, and, where appropriate, to modify these arguments.
- a general awareness of contemporary issues in the relevant area of applied ethics.

Students who obtain the MA will have attained all the objectives of the Diploma and in addition a thorough knowledge of a particular issue or topic in applied ethics which bears directly on their professional work. They will also have acquired the ability to pursue a piece of independent research in applied ethics and/or law.

Subsidiary course

Aims:

The main aims of the course are:

- to introduce non-specialists in philosophy to a range of views on human nature and varying perspectives on morality;
- to introduce non-specialists in philosophy to key figures in modern political philosophy especially in relation to social contract theories.

Objectives:

- the capacity to evaluate what impact accounts of human nature have had on views about the nature of morality;
- to understand the role that the concepts of the state of nature and the social contract play in our thinking about our relation to the state.

Summary of the Review

6. The graded profile in paragraph 7 indicates the extent to which the student learning experience and achievement demonstrate that the aims and objectives set by the subject provider are being met. The tests and the criteria applied by the reviewers are these:

Aspects of provision

1. Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation
2. Teaching, Learning and Assessment
3. Student Progression and Achievement
4. Student Support and Guidance
5. Learning Resources
6. Quality Management and Enhancement.

Tests to be applied

To what extent do the student learning experience and student achievement, within this aspect of provision, contribute to meeting the objectives set by the subject provider?

Do the objectives set, and the level of attainment of those objectives, allow the aims set by the subject provider to be met?

Scale points

1

The aims and/or objectives set by the subject provider are not met; there are major shortcomings that must be rectified.

2

This aspect makes an acceptable contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives, but significant improvement could be made.

The aims set by the subject provider are broadly met.

3

This aspect makes a substantial contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives; however, there is scope for improvement.

The aims set by the subject provider are substantially met.

4

This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives.

The aims set by the subject provider are met.

7. The grades awarded as a result of the review are:

Aspects of provision	Grade
Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation	4
Teaching, Learning and Assessment	4
Student Progression and Achievement	4
Student Support and Guidance	4
Learning Resources	4
Quality Management and Enhancement	4

8. The quality of education in philosophy at the University of Keele is **approved**.

The Quality of Education

Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation

9. The provision in philosophy comprises distinctive courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Highly innovative postgraduate curricula are well matched to the needs of their client groups, composed mainly of practitioners from the health care, social work and legal professions. Content is professionally relevant and has immediate practical application. A sign-language interpreter, for example, reported that the course sharpened awareness and understanding of the ethical implications of signing. The focus is on topical issues such as sex selection, patient autonomy and euthanasia. Intensive three-day teaching and learning blocks, incorporating research-methods training, are well designed to facilitate study for part-time students with professional commitments. Interdisciplinarity is a major feature of the postgraduate curricula, reinforced by teaching arrangements that involve staff, expert in the relevant professional fields as well as philosophy staff who are themselves up to speed with current professional practice and regulations,

10. Curriculum content at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels reflects developments in the discipline and is informed by staff scholarship and research interests. In the undergraduate curriculum, the special subjects, offered as double module options in the final year, particularly reflect staff specialisms. These include Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Time and Contemporary Moral Issues.

11. The focus on the analytic tradition and solid grounding in the history of philosophy lend coherence to the undergraduate curriculum. An appropriate range of modules covers all the main areas of the discipline, enabling students to develop knowledge and understanding of a variety of philosophical traditions and classic works alongside skills of argument, analysis and communication. Appropriate levels of study allow progressive development of knowledge and skills. The special subject modules draw on the broad knowledge base acquired in preceding years. For example, Philosophy of Religion draws on metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and ethics. Choice of modules within philosophy is limited, but breadth of perspective is ensured by the dual honours degree programme, which also offers a multidisciplinary approach. Some philosophy modules have natural connections with other disciplines, for example, Philosophy of Mind with psychology.

12. The subsidiary course modules, covering modern political philosophy and theories of human nature and morality, are effective in providing an appropriate introduction to the subject for non-specialists.

13. Curricula are well designed to implement the objectives set for each course. They are clearly structured and information about them is readily accessible to students. Current and former students gave extremely positive evaluations of the curriculum, describing it as 'challenging', 'rigorous', 'stimulating', 'rewarding' and 'inspiring'.

14. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation:
Grade 4.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

15. The teaching and learning strategy precisely matches the subject aims and objectives. The overall aim is to provide a learning experience in which central philosophical questions are explored, problems scrutinised, philosophical understanding is enhanced, and argumentative and communications skills are developed. This is achieved through the use of lectures, seminars, postgraduate case-study workshops, and independent study.

16. The reviewers observed a representative sample of teaching and learning at each level. Classes had clearly articulated aims, and the material presented was up-to-date and well prepared, enlivened by the excellent use of examples and case studies. Helpful handouts were provided. Effective, interdisciplinary team teaching was observed in the postgraduate sessions. These sessions provided an impressive model of how to get practitioners to understand and use philosophical tools.

17. Philosophical discussion, central to the Department's conception of philosophical education and commitment to teaching key skills, was a strong feature of all classes. Students participated well, strongly encouraged by the enthusiastic and pro-active style of staff, and their skilful use of small and large-group teaching techniques. The openness and liveliness of the discussions demonstrated an ethos of collaboration and a shared passion for philosophy empowering students to make a valuable contribution to their own learning.

18. Helpful written guidance supports students' learning. The undergraduate student handbook provides useful guidelines on writing philosophy essays and presenting arguments. The excellent postgraduate handbooks, containing clear and comprehensive

information on research methods and skills, are examples of best practice. Skilful and encouraging supervision of MA dissertations is student focused and well adapted to individual students' learning styles and work patterns. MA supervisors make effective use of email in working with students on their dissertations.

19. Assessment modes are well matched to level and relevant learning outcomes; comprising essays and written examinations for undergraduates, and extended essays and dissertations for postgraduates. Criteria for assessment are clearly expressed and effectively employed in marking, which is thorough, fair and subject to internal and external moderation. Formative assessment is provided in one-to-one feedback meetings with module tutors and feedback notes accompanying returned essays. The Department complies with the University's commendable policy that feedback on students' work must be given within four weeks of submission. Students are satisfied with the feedback received and the reviewers encountered good examples of helpful and detailed written feedback in their sampling of students' work.

20. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Teaching, Learning and Assessment:
Grade 4.

Student Progression and Achievement

21. The ratio of applications to places on undergraduate programmes is 5:1. Over 90 per cent of entrants have GCE A-Level qualifications with an average score of 20.8 points. Some 13 per cent are mature and there is an approximately equal number of male and female students. All qualified applicants are accepted on the postgraduate courses. Applicants must normally have a relevant first degree or professional qualification. Nearly 80 per cent of postgraduates are women. A key strength is the diverse student profile on the postgraduate courses. Students come from a range of professions and include, for example; lawyers, doctors, radiographers, nurses, midwives, psychologists, teachers, social and community workers, and a police surgeon. Their different specialisms and perspectives inform class discussion and enrich the learning experience.

22. Academic failure rates are low. In 1999-2000 there was only one failure on the undergraduate course and one on the MA courses. Retention rates on the undergraduate course have improved, with withdrawals and transfers out averaging at just over 10 per cent in the past two years. Careful monitoring of trends is evident at both university and subject levels. Retention

rates on postgraduate courses are very impressive at an average of over 95 per cent, with 100 per cent retention on one course last year.

23. Final achievement at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is very good. On average, 70 per cent of undergraduates receive at least an Upper Second class honours degree and most of the remainder receive a Lower Second. Of the postgraduates, some 70 per cent are awarded an MA and 30 per cent a Diploma. In 1999 and 2000, 10 per cent of MA graduates from the two established courses, Medical Ethics and Law and Ethics of Cancer and Palliative Care, attained a Distinction.

24. The reviewers sampled a range of students' written work at each level. The sample confirmed the positive comments made by external examiners and demonstrated that students were achieving the stated objectives, particularly in relation to skills of argument, analysis and presentation, at an appropriate level. Positive features included good research, wide-ranging bibliographies and sensitive handling of difficult issues. The postgraduate work revealed genuine attempts to link philosophical theory with professional practice.

25. Destination data show good employment rates and a range of interesting careers obtained by students graduating from the undergraduate course in addition to the 20 per cent who go on to further academic work. Current and former postgraduates confirmed that the courses brought them personal fulfilment, professional development and enhanced career opportunities. All students were very positive about the benefits of the courses and the knowledge, awareness, skills and qualities that they engendered.

26. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Student Progression and Achievement:
Grade 4.

Student Support and Guidance

27. The warm and congenial atmosphere created by academic and support staff fosters 'the friendly and stimulating learning environment' claimed in the self-assessment document. Academic and pastoral care emerges seamlessly from the attitudes of the staff towards the students. Students confirm that they can approach any member of staff and that there is always an open door.

28. The informal support culture is underpinned by effective formal mechanisms. The postgraduate admissions' procedure includes a valuable opportunity for applicants to discuss their educational needs with

the departmental recruitment officer. The University conducts undergraduate admissions and open days. Effective induction procedures are in place and students receive a useful induction handbook. A year tutor oversees the overall progress and pastoral welfare of each cohort of undergraduates throughout their course. For academic guidance, students see their module tutors each semester in one-to-one meetings. Postgraduates are assigned personal supervisors who provide them with academic and pastoral care. Both undergraduates and postgraduates have a good understanding of the support structure, which is clearly outlined in student handbooks and other literature. In their meetings with the reviewers, they expressed considerable satisfaction with the high level of support available to them.

29. Good formal links and friendly informal relations have been established between the Department and the comprehensive University support system including careers, counselling, disability and learning-support services, residential and student support, admissions, a chaplaincy, an international office and a health centre. Key staff in these areas are efficient, able to identify relevant points of contact in the Department and demonstrate full awareness of the needs of philosophy students. The University 24-hour handbook gives subject staff a useful reference guide to University and external information and advice services. Both central and departmental staff make effective use of email to contact students.

30. The University careers service provides advice to students through its office, its excellent website, and workshops, organised jointly with the Department, covering topics such as the changing job market, work experience, and skills sought by employers. In addition, subject staff give individual, informed and impartial advice about postgraduate study in philosophy.

31. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Student Support and Guidance:
Grade 4.

Learning Resources

32. The Department is located in Keele Hall, an attractive 19th century listed building, set on campus. Students report that this provides an environment that is conducive to the study of philosophy and contributes to the sense of departmental community. At present, the accommodation does not include a common room. A suitable forum for informal philosophical discussion and debate to complement classroom activities would enhance the students' learning experience.

33. Much undergraduate teaching takes place in Keele Hall, but most postgraduate classes are held in the nearby Keele Management Centre. Teaching on the Ethics of Cancer and Palliative Care course takes place at the Marie Curie Centre in Liverpool, a purpose-built hospice incorporating an Education Department. The teaching accommodation seen by the reviewers, on the Keele Campus, was pleasant and suitably equipped. Students confirm that teaching accommodation at the Marie Curie Centre is well appointed.

34. An effective learning resources strategy focuses on making best use of fairly modest resources to ensure that they meet curriculum requirements and students' needs. The Department has appropriate arrangements for liaising with Keele Information Services (KIS), which manages the University library and computing services. KIS provides effective technical support including induction and continuing assistance for students in library and computer use. Students confirm that KIS staff are helpful and efficient.

35. University library holdings are relatively small but students have sufficient access to key texts. There is a variety of electronic resources for philosophy, including bibliographic databases and access to on-line journals. A dedicated short-loan facility holds multiple copies of many core texts and relevant photocopies lodged by module tutors. A philosophy collection, housed in the School resource room, supplements the main library provision, but has limited opening hours. Access to the University library, which is open more than 90 hours a week during term, is very good. Study space is ample. The UK Libraries Plus scheme, allowing access to country-wide academic libraries, is a valuable facility for postgraduate students, most of whom are part-time distance learners. They also benefit from off-campus access to the University's electronic resources.

36. All students are given an email address. Philosophy students have adequate access to computing workstations across the campus, and student rooms are currently being networked. Philosophy staff are keen to develop the recently constructed School web pages. However, a pilot exercise to introduce an email discussion board for some undergraduate courses was unsuccessful. Students expressed general satisfaction with library and information technology provision.

37. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Learning Resources:
Grade 4.

Quality Management and Enhancement

38. There are appropriate quality assurance procedures at university, school and module levels. The University committee structure is used effectively to monitor the implementation of action points arising from periodic internal quality audit and the subject annual monitoring process.

39. Rigorous mechanisms are in place for monitoring the subject team's responses to external examiners' reports. The few concerns raised by external examiners for philosophy are carefully considered and acted on. For example, a comment on 'depressing standards of literacy' in relation to some postgraduate work, has resulted in greater emphasis on guiding students in presentation and referencing.

40. Serious consideration is given to students' views. In addition to the excellent informal relationship between staff and students, formal mechanisms are used effectively to gather and address student feedback. Undergraduates are represented on the staff-student liaison committee (SSLC), which meets regularly. The Students' Union provides training for student representatives. Undergraduates complete module evaluations and postgraduates complete teaching-block evaluations, which are considered at the SSLC and Committee for Graduate Studies respectively. Responses are monitored by the University's Quality Assurance Director. Students confirm that their voice is heard and that they can secure improvements by both formal and informal means. The introduction of group feedback on examinations is a recent example.

41. Arrangements for staff development are good. Annual peer appraisal identifies development and training needs. In addition to research leave and discipline-specific development opportunities, staff have attended courses, for example, on PowerPoint presentations and writing for the internet. There is evidence of effective dissemination of good practice within and beyond the Department, for example, workshops on group teaching led by a member of the philosophy team. Induction and mentoring are provided for new, temporary and part-time staff. This includes formal observation of teaching. Otherwise, internal peer review of teaching takes place informally, and through team teaching on postgraduate courses. A key strength is the University training programme, which can lead to a formal qualification, the Associate Teacher Certificate or Higher Education Teaching Certificate. Although there is an increased reliance on temporary staff, mainly due to staff success in obtaining research grants, arrangements, such as the maintenance of a 'handout bank' and the introduction of a detailed staff handbook, help to secure continuity of teaching and support for students,

42. The culture of critical self-evaluation and willingness to embrace new ideas and change, apparent on the visit, was not fully reflected in the self-assessment document, which failed to do justice to the distinctiveness and very high quality of provision.

43. This aspect makes a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives. The aims set by the subject provider are met.

Quality Management and Enhancement:
Grade 4.

Conclusions

44. The quality of education in philosophy at the University of Keele is approved. All aspects make a full contribution to the attainment of the stated objectives and the aims are met. The reviewers come to this conclusion, based upon the review visit together with an analysis of the self-assessment and additional data provided.

45. The positive features of the education in philosophy in relation to the aspects of provision include the following:

- a. Highly innovative, interdisciplinary postgraduate curricula with immediate application to professional practice (paragraph 9)
- b. Good depth and breadth offered by the undergraduate curriculum within the distinctive Keele Dual Honours framework (paragraph 11)
- c. Effective and enthusiastic teaching and supervision (paragraphs 16; 18).
- d. Strong emphasis on discussion as an essential feature of the students' learning experience (paragraph 17).
- e. Positive achievements of undergraduates (paragraph 23).
- f. Personal fulfilment, professional development and career enhancement for postgraduates (paragraph 25).
- g. Friendly and supportive departmental atmosphere and approachable staff (paragraph 27).
- h. Excellent relations between subject staff and University student support services (paragraph 29).
- i. Pleasant environment afforded by Keele Hall conducive to the study of philosophy and contributing to a sense of community (paragraph 32).
- j. Responsiveness of Keele Information Services to needs of students in philosophy (paragraph 34).
- k. Combination of informal and formal factors contributing to a strong quality framework (paragraphs 38 to 40).
- l. Mentoring and training arrangements for new staff (paragraph 41).