



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Academic review: subject review

Economics

University of Stirling

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Academic review of UK higher education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA) helps to provide public assurance that the quality and standards of higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced by conducting academic reviews of higher education provision.

In developing its method for academic review, the QAA has published a wide range of materials designed to provide a background against which the reviews can take place. These are:

- *Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland;*
- *Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland;*
- subject benchmark statements;
- *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education;*
- *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications.*

The review process

The QAA carries out reviews of individual subjects through service level agreements with the main higher education funding bodies. It also carries out institutional reviews of higher education institutions. The judgements made by the subject reviewers can contribute substantially to institutional review.

Subject review

Subject review is a peer review process. It starts when institutions evaluate their provision in a subject in a self-evaluation document. This document is submitted to the QAA for use by a team of reviewers who gather evidence to enable them to report their judgements on the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Review activities include meeting staff and students, scrutinising students' assessed work, reading relevant documents, and examining learning resources.

Full details of the process of subject review can be found in the *Handbook for academic review, QAA, 2000*.

Judgements

The range of judgements that reviewers may utilise when they have completed a subject review are summarised below.

Academic standards

Reviewers make one of the following judgements on standards:

- **confidence**, which may be expressed as **limited confidence**; or
- **no confidence**.

To reach this judgement, reviewers look at:

- learning outcomes;
- the curriculum;
- student assessment; and
- student achievement.

Quality of learning opportunities

Reviewers make one of the following judgements for each of three aspects of learning opportunities:

- **commendable**, (which may include exemplary features); or
- **approved**; or
- **failing**.

The three aspects of quality of learning opportunities are:

- teaching and learning;
- student progression; and
- learning resources.

Maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards

Reviewers also report the degree of confidence they have in the institution's ability to maintain and enhance quality and standards in the subject under review.

Introduction

1. This report presents the findings of a review of the academic standards achieved, and the quality of the learning opportunities provided, in economics at the University of Stirling. The review was completed in the academic year 2001-02.

A. Subject Provision and Overall Aims

2. At undergraduate level, the University of Stirling operates a modular structure based on semester units. This provides flexibility in the design of a wide range of different programmes. The system also allows breadth of study in the first two years, in accordance with the Scottish educational tradition, and facilitates transfer between programmes.

3. The Department of Economics offers 30 semester units at undergraduate level, structured to provide progression through the use of prerequisites. Various subsets of these units constitute the economics component of the following programmes:

- Honours in Economics;
- Honours in Money, Banking and Finance;
- Combined Honours programmes (with a wide range of other subjects across the University);
- Bachelor's degree in Economics;
- The General Degree;
- Diploma in Higher Education; and
- Certificate in Higher Education.

In addition, the Department of Economics administers and teaches on the MSc/Diploma in Banking and Finance and contributes to the teaching of other postgraduate programmes outside the remit of the review.

4. The overall aims of the Department of Economics are to:

- provide high-quality programmes that achieve the outcomes specified for the relevant level in the qualifications framework and prepare students for employment or further study;
- provide flexible programmes that enable students to study economics to a level, and in combination with other subjects, relevant to their capabilities and interests, with the opportunity to adjust their programmes in the light of progress;
- offer programmes that meet international and national demand; and
- widen access to all those who can benefit from the study of economics.

5. In 2000-01 there were 195 full-time equivalent (FTE) students on the undergraduate programmes and 28 on the postgraduate provision.

B Academic standards

Intended learning outcomes

6. The intended learning outcomes for the provision are clearly stated in the undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks. These learning outcomes are classified in terms of the broad categories of knowledge and understanding specific to economics, and the key transferable skills of written and oral communication, analysis and problem-solving, learning, self management and computing and statistics. At honours level, learning outcomes have clearly been framed in relation to the subject benchmarks.

7. The most recent internal review in 2000 highlighted the Department's concern to fulfil the benchmark requirement of a sufficient level of quantitative analysis. This has been directly addressed by the introduction of a further compulsory quantitative unit in year three.

8. Within the core of the undergraduate programme, the learning outcomes are mapped against the classification of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) but the University recognises that currently the use of 'non-advanced' and 'advanced' does not correspond to the SCQF descriptors. Although this nomenclature is under review, the Department of Economics feels that, in practice, economics units fit readily into the classification. Prerequisites are carefully specified and constantly reviewed by the Department through the reviews of units.

9. It is clear from the programme specification that a wide range of learning outcomes are intended, although unit descriptions do not always make it clear how each unit contributes to the overall learning outcomes. This is the first year in which the Department is directly identifying learning outcomes, and it acknowledges that it needs to address this more explicitly. At present, learning outcomes in the unit descriptions are specified only in relation to knowledge and

understanding. Thus, it was difficult for the reviewers to get a sense, from unit descriptions, as to why each unit is appropriate to that level. The reviewers would encourage the Department to ensure that learning outcomes are explicitly mapped across the core curricula.

10. The Department provides a specialist **MSc in Banking and Finance**, drawing on departmental expertise in this area. The learning outcomes outlined are appropriate to this specialist programme.

11. The learning outcomes are appropriate to the overall aims of the provision and those aims specified in the context of teaching economics. Great flexibility is offered to students in their choices of economics units. This applies to all students irrespective of whether they are single or, more typically, combined honours students. The reviewers were convinced that students achieve the range of intended learning outcomes and that the curricula reflect both the benchmark statements for economics and the spirit of the qualifications framework.

Curricula

12. The curricula for economics, reflecting the traditional Scottish four-year degree structure, offer students the flexibility of taking three subjects in years one and two before choosing their degree pathway. The University of Stirling system is such that students are not clearly identified as economics students until entry into the honours programme.

13. The programme specifications and the honours handbook establish the coherence of the programme, in which the core provides the essential theoretical and quantitative basis for modern economics. The provision demonstrates a comprehensive approach to the development of subject-specific skills. Both the single honours and combined degrees enable students to develop the essential subject skills. The curriculum for each degree pathway offers a coherent programme of study. Combined honours degrees, with certain well-documented exceptions (for example, with accountancy) share a common core of economic concepts and principles.

14. The common core covers a wide range of learning outcomes up to level 3. In years three and four, an extensive range of option modules complements this nucleus and allows students to tailor the programme to their particular needs. In meetings with the reviewers, current students

indicated that they are satisfied with the degree programme and with the range of choice available to them at honours level.

15. In order to facilitate flexibility, encourage the widest possible study of economics and meet the University's desire to have two start points in the year, the introductory units may be studied in either order. This is a praiseworthy approach that clearly facilitates flexible study.

16. In a number of areas, staff have shown initiative in curricula development and in supporting such developments with the writing of books. New units have been introduced at honours level, for example in Economic Dynamics, and there is a regular review of options to meet student demand and reflect current staff expertise. Staff research and scholarship contribute to the relevance of programme content at levels 3 and 4. External examiners endorse both the content and relevance of the curricula.

17. A dissertation is required for all pathways, although in combined honours degrees it may be in the other discipline. The reviewers, together with the external examiners, noted the high standard of dissertation work. While dissertation supervision operates well on personal contact at present, it could usefully be supplemented with clearer written guidance.

18. The evidence of the review, from meetings with students and student work, offers reassurance that key transferable skills are currently embedded within the curricula. However, the reviewers strongly suggest that the Department make its treatment of key transferable skills more explicit.

19. Documentation provided to students by the Department relating to curricula content is full and informative. The student handbook is well constructed and appropriately targeted. Material distributed for individual units, while variable in format, is generally appropriate and of a high quality. The Department might consider introducing a more consistent format for unit handbooks. It is clear to the reviewers that students are given very full information about their programmes of study, primarily through the adviser of studies.

20. Overall, the curricula are appropriate for the attainment of the stated learning outcomes.

Assessment

21. It is evident that the Department has thought carefully about assessment methods, and has considerable experience in addressing issues arising from a modular degree structure in a teaching year divided into semesters. As part of this, the Department has a policy of a choice of deadlines for students to submit work in an attempt to remove bottlenecks.

22. An appropriate and varied range of methods of assessment are used. The intended learning outcomes are specified at programme but not at unit level. It was, therefore, difficult for the reviewers to verify that individual unit assessments are appropriate. Overall, however, the reviewers' sampling of student work suggested that the programmes' intended learning outcomes are being achieved.

23. Students know that there is a University-wide grading system, but are given limited written guidance as to what constitutes required performance at each level. The departmental staff handbook contains newly-introduced guidelines relating performance to grading; the Department is reluctant to give this information to students since the scheme is still experimental. However, the reviewers think that the experiment is commendable and hope that it will enable students to be given written advice very soon. Similarly, the useful presentation assessment form described in the departmental staff handbook should be communicated to students and more generally used.

24. The reviewers have confidence in the security and integrity of the assessment procedures. All coursework is submitted by matriculation number, not name of student. For first and second-year students the course coordinator rereads a sample of coursework and examination papers. For third and fourth-year work, a second marker reads all coursework that counts towards the final mark and the examination papers. External examiners have raised no problems about assessment procedures. External examiners sample the coursework; their comments are taken seriously, and followed up by written responses by the Department.

25. Some written assessment is formative. There is no standard procedure for giving students written feedback on formative assessment. However, very constructive advice is given in tutorials and, in some cases, in written comment on essays and other work. Coursework is returned very promptly

with comments. Except for some of the larger introductory units, coursework is returned within a fortnight having been double-marked. It is a strength of the University's modular scheme that students can select their courses for the second semester fully aware of their performance in the first semester.

26. The standards achieved by students in the Department are fully consistent with the expectations in the *Subject benchmark statement* for economics.

Student achievement

27. The range of honours results is satisfactory. The number of honours students is small, so the proportion achieving different classes of honours is rather variable. On average, only about 6 per cent achieve First class honours degrees; however, the proportion achieving at least an Upper Second is consistently above 60 per cent, and only very rarely do honours students graduate with less than a Lower Second. Similarly, for the MSc programme, failures even in individual units are very few, and the overwhelming majority of results are in the upper grades.

28. The reports of external examiners confirm their satisfaction with student achievement. External examiners agree that standards are sound, with student achievement overall matching the learning outcomes and the level of the awards.

29. The reviewers agree with the external examiners regarding the high level of student achievement. This was confirmed through the reviewers' scrutiny of a wide range of assessed student work, including essays and examination scripts. The sample included first and second-year units, the core third and fourth-year units, and some MSc units.

30. With respect to academic standards, the reviewers conclude that:

- the intended learning outcomes for both the undergraduate and postgraduate provision are clearly stated and appropriate to the overall aims of the provision;
- the programme specifications establish a coherent programme and demonstrate a comprehensive approach to the development of subject-specific skills;

- the Department has considerable experience in addressing issues arising from a modular degree structure. An appropriate and varied range of methods of assessment are used;
- the range of honours results achieved is very satisfactory. Overall, external examiners confirm the standards, and standards achieved by students are fully consistent with the expectations of the economics benchmark.

Overall, the reviewers have confidence in the academic standards achieved by the programmes in economics at the University of Stirling.

C Quality of learning opportunities

Teaching and learning

31. The standard pattern for the delivery of teaching is two lectures per unit with three in core units, and one weekly class in groups of about 10. The University's internal review of 2000 suggested continued excellence in teaching. Students were able to confirm this, commenting especially on the care and attention they receive from the Department.

32. The Department places a considerable emphasis on the importance of teaching. New staff are appointed on probation for three years and draw up an annual teaching plan on which they are assessed. All staff are appraised on a two-year cycle, and teaching performance is reviewed and development needs identified. Teaching assistants are given generic training. All staff are evaluated by students in relation to their teaching.

33. Membership of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education is being encouraged within the University. New staff attend an induction programme provided by the University and are supported by a nominated senior colleague. The turnover of staff in the Department of Economics has been very low in recent years and so there is little experience of this. Teaching assistants are supported formally and informally from within the staff group.

34. There is clear evidence of student involvement in the Department's review processes. Class representatives and the staff-student committee feel free to raise issues concerning teaching and learning. Team teaching is widespread and the unit coordinator takes an overall view of the quality of individual units.

35. There is also evidence that the research expertise of staff is closely integrated into teaching. The modular nature of the provision, coupled with a uniform pattern of assessment, means that student workloads are predictable. In most units, students are given a choice of deadlines and can therefore plan their work schedule over the semester to avoid excessive workloads in particular weeks.

36. The reviewers are able to confirm that students are aware of, and achieve, the subject-specific skills as outlined in the learning outcomes, as well as the wider transferable and practical skills specified in course handbooks.

37. The provision contributes substantially to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with most elements demonstrating good practice.

The quality of teaching and learning is commendable.

Student progression

38. Undergraduate students are admitted to the University, not the Department, and become clearly identified with the Department only from the second semester of their second-year. The degree structure requires all undergraduates to take units other than in their main subject, and facilitates their switching away from their original subject choice. For these reasons, measuring undergraduate student progression is somewhat problematic. The measure that the Department finds most meaningful is the relationship between the number of students in any cohort originally applying to take a degree involving economics, and those actually graduating with such a degree. Data supplied to the reviewers show that the Department's performance is in line with the University's average.

39. University advisers of studies ensure that undergraduate and postgraduate students follow units to enable them to graduate. Nearly all members of staff act as advisers and have about 20 students each. Advisers see their students at the start of each semester, and are available to see them at any other time. Advisers receive information from departments about the performance of their students, and respond to students' requests for pastoral help. In economics, the Head of Department offers subject-specific advice, and the Department holds pre-registration meetings to guide students. Effective arrangements are in place to contact students who miss tutorials

or fail to submit coursework. Students find the University's advice and pastoral help network highly satisfactory, and regard the departmental staff as very supportive. The departmental undergraduate handbook provides a general induction for all undergraduates, and its MSc handbook does the same for postgraduates.

40. Students have academic tutors for all their units. Teaching assistants take some of the tutorials in the first and second years. The tutorials are very effective; in addition, students feel that they have easy access to their tutors and lecturers outside of the tutorials.

41. Provision for students with special needs is coordinated at university level. Lecture theatres are equipped for students using wheelchairs and for those with hearing impairments.

42. The provision contributes substantially to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with most elements demonstrating good practice.

The quality of student progression is commendable.

Learning resources

43. The responsibility for resourcing the economics provision is divided between the University, the Faculty of Management and the Department of Economics.

44. There are 11 FTE academic staff responsible for teaching economics, giving a student-staff ratio of 19:1. However, these staff are supplemented by four part-time teaching assistants. The staffing level is appropriate for the provision currently being offered. There is an active research seminar programme, sabbatical leave and funding for conference attendance.

45. The main university library is centrally located and operates generous opening hours seven days a week during term-time. Book and periodical stocks are appropriate for undergraduates' needs. The pressures of demand on heavily used texts and journal articles are well managed, in part by the use of a short-loan scheme. There are effective links with the Department through a liaison librarian and a member of staff charged with the task of library liaison. Students' complaints about library matters are dealt with fairly and effectively.

46. Students have good access to information technology facilities on campus, in some places on a 24-hour basis. Student access to computer facilities has improved in recent years. A range of software relevant to economics students is available, including appropriate specialist packages. The machines are located conveniently across the campus, including in the main library and some halls of residence. Students are satisfied with the library and computing facilities, and feel that they support their learning in an effective manner. Students are provided with well-designed and effective induction in the use of electronic resources on arrival at the University. The Department has experimented with use of the internet by individual staff initiative.

47. Overall, the teaching accommodation is of a good quality, with the provision of relevant audiovisual facilities. Lectures are held close to the Department. A dedicated classroom within the Department is used for small-group teaching, providing an identifiable focus for departmental activities. The office space for academic and administrative staff is of good quality, with individual staff rooms each equipped with a fully networked PC.

48. The provision contributes substantially to the achievement of the intended outcomes, with most elements demonstrating good practice.

The quality of learning resources is commendable.

D Maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards

49. The University's arrangements for maintaining and enhancing standards and quality are comprehensive and well documented. There are clear links between university, faculty and departmental responsibilities. These procedures allow problems to be identified and effective action to be taken and monitored. The Department is conscientious in ensuring that institutional procedures are considered and implemented, for example in relation to academic standards.

50. A rigorous process of periodic review involves assessors who are external to the University. The last fully completed periodic review of the Department's provision, in 1997, resulted in clear recommendations that have been acted upon. The reviewers are impressed with the processes and the

comprehensive nature of the periodic review report on the Department of Economics in 2000, to which the Department has begun to make appropriate responses.

51. Annual monitoring is centred on a summary programme report which draws on individual unit reports and external examiners' reports. The comments of external examiners are given proper consideration, with action taken where appropriate. There is evidence that recommendations for action are followed through by the Department and implemented where appropriate.

52. At departmental level, the reviewers believe that there is an appropriate culture of reviewing and improving teaching performance. Central to the process of enhancement is the Departmental Committee, which considers a range of issues relating to the curricula. Students on each unit complete anonymous questionnaires; response rates are quite high. Staff are expected to comment in writing on students' views, and these comments show evidence of reflective consideration of students' remarks. There is evidence of problems being recognised and addressed, with discussion taking place in the departmental academic meeting.

53. The Department has low staff turnover so a smooth evolution of ideas has occurred. The Department's staff handbook brings together a range of documentation on quality issues, and is given to all staff.

54. The reviewers have full confidence in the ability of the Department to maintain and enhance the quality of its provision, but note, as does the Department, the increasing age profile of the staff. The reviewers suggest strongly that this should be taken into account and steps taken to ensure a smooth transition to future changes in the Department's membership and organisation.

Summary of the main review outcomes

Subject provision and overall aims

Economics programmes at the University of Stirling were reviewed in the academic year 2001-02. Judgements were made about the academic standards achieved and the quality of the learning opportunities provided.

The review covered the following programmes:

- Honours in Economics;
- Honours in Money, Banking and Finance;
- Combined Honours programmes (with a wide range of other subjects across the University);
- Bachelor's degree in Economics;
- The General Degree;
- Diploma in Higher Education; and
- Certificate in Higher Education.

In addition, the Department of Economics administers and teaches on the MSc/Diploma in Banking and Finance.

Academic standards

Overall, the reviewers have **confidence** in the academic standards achieved by the programmes in economics at the University of Stirling.

Strengths include:

- a clear and appropriate set of learning outcomes;
- a curriculum that delivers a coherent programme, and demonstrates a comprehensive approach to the delivery of subject-specific skills;
- students' achievement of standards that are fully consistent with the expectations of the economics benchmark.

Quality of learning opportunities

Teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is **commendable**:

- the Department places a considerable emphasis on the importance of teaching, and students commented favourably on the care and attention they receive from the Department regarding their work;
- the reviewers are able to confirm that students are aware of and achieve the subject-specific skills as outlined in the learning outcomes.

Student progression

The quality of student progression is **commendable**:

- undergraduates are admitted to the University, not the Department, and become clearly identified with the Department only from the second semester of their second-year. However, the University's advisers of studies ensure that undergraduate and postgraduate students follow units to enable them to graduate;

- the provision for students with special needs is very strong and is coordinated at University level.

Learning resources

The quality of learning resources is **commendable**:

- the staffing level is appropriate for the provision currently being offered;
- overall, the teaching accommodation is of good quality, with the relevant equipment provided.

Maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards

The reviewers feel that the University's approaches and processes for reviewing and maintaining standards are rigorous and thorough. The framework of quality assurance procedures enables the reviewers to have confidence in the ability of the Department to maintain and enhance the quality and standards of its programmes in economics. Appropriate systems are in place for maintaining and enhancing academic standards.

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