School of Biological Sciences

Response to Postgraduate Programme Review

The School would like to thank the Panel for the largely positive feedback contained in its report, and for the constructive nature of its recommendations. We respond to each of the recommendations below.

A. Recommendations to the School:

Taught Masters programmes

1. To assist with the development of intake numbers of the new programmes the School is recommended to work closely with the Communications and Marketing team (market research tools) and the International Office (promotion) to strengthen overseas promotion and to target and develop markets in countries with strong traditions in undergraduate provision in biological sciences.

   Relevant staff are already engaging with staff from CAM and the International Office and this interaction will continue to develop.

2. The Panels recommends that the Programme Directors actively work with the School’s new Director of Internationalization to identify ways to expand international student numbers.

   Relevant to recommendations 1 and 2, the School recently received support from the International Office via the Edinburgh Global Fund, the proceeds of which were used to hire a part-time Administrative Coordinator whose mandate is to further develop recruitment and conversion of International student applicants. This Administrator works with the new Director of Internationalisation, Prof. David Arnot, with the specific purpose of promoting awareness and recruitment of non-EU/UK students to both the new MSc in development (Biotechnology) and to all other existing SBS MSc Programmes. A number of new MSc. Courses, including an MSc in Biotechnology and Innovation, are being developed, to start in September 2011. It is hoped that these will attract a significant number of international student applications.

3. The Panel recommends that the School looks to develop strategies to utilise existing research collaborations to actively raise the profile of the taught masters provision within collaborative institutions’ undergraduate populations.

   Several initiatives to publicise the MSc. Biotechnology in India are underway, this being a centre of student demand for such courses. Further research and publicity, possibly through a joint meeting with Indian collaborators are being investigated. We will explore other means for our staff to promote Masters programmes when visiting other institutions.
The Panel noted that neither of the two established programmes had shown any growth in student numbers over the review period. The Panel recommends that the School carries out a strategic review of the capacity and the opportunity for growth in these programmes.

The two established programmes have distinctive reasons for their current stable intakes. Biodiversity and Taxonomy of Plants is run in collaboration with RBGE, who carry out the vast majority of the teaching at Inverleith (thus minimising costs to the School). The programme capacity is restricted by the availability of space and facilities at RBGE. It will be appropriate to review the delivery mode with RBGE to ensure this constraint remains necessary and appropriate. Quantitative Genetics and Genome Analysis may have more scope to expand. As a programme primarily directed mainly at pre-PhD academic training, it is not clear there is a larger market. However overseas intake has historically been low and could be a potential area for growth. We will act on the recommendation that a review of this programme is appropriate to determine future capacity and value. The School will continue its efforts to promote these Programmes in addition to the new Programmes, in close collaboration with Marketing and Internalisation as described above.

Research Degrees

The Panel noted the concerns raised by the staff and students in identifying appropriate training courses. The Panel recommends that the School takes steps, as an interim measure, to make current lists of courses more accessible to staff and students through the induction process and at the beginning of each academic year as an interim step.

Current course lists are now available on the Graduate School wiki and are highlighted in the induction process for new students.

The Panel recommends that the School investigates the use of video streaming to increase accessibility to seminar series, particularly for students who were based outwith the KB campus. The Panel also recommends that the School investigates the use of external lecture series such as the Henry Stewart Lectures; Biomedical & Life Sciences Collection to provide accessible specialist technical training for students.

The School will pilot web-casting and pod-casting of the Cell and Molecular Biology student and research staff Wednesday Seminar Series to RBGE between October and December 2010. The Henry Stewart Lectures have now been added to our recommended course options for supervisors and new students, and are linked to from the wiki.

The Panel recommends that the School introduces comprehensive lists of the research groups and their interests (and building location) in an easily accessible format eg on the web pages or through MyEd.
Such lists are already available on the new School website. The School’s research facilities are listed on the School intranet.

8 The Panel noted the student concerns regarding the lack of guidance on data storage and archiving and recommends that the School look to include guidance as a component of the induction programme for research students.

Guidance on data storage and archiving will be developed, to be added to our induction materials by September 2011.

9 The Panel recommends that the Graduate School reviews the current staff induction programme to identify how the programme can be enhanced to provide support for new staff undertaking supervisory duties for the first time at the University.

All supervisors new to the School attend the College’s Supervisor Briefing Sessions. The School’s Administrative Officer is leading an Induction Project in the School to improve induction materials, and these will include information for new supervisors. Materials will also be available to all supervisors on the School’s Staff wiki by September 2011.

10 The Panel recommends that the School develops a strategy to raise the profile of the Graduate School in the student population. The Graduate School should have an overarching view of PGR within the School and should be able to facilitate interactions (both social and academic) between students from different institutes.

The Graduate School wiki and handbook are one way of promoting the central role of the Graduate School. The Graduate School hosts an annual Poster Day each September and tailored training events for students but will work with the PhD student reps to facilitate other School-wide social and training events.

Management and operation of Postgraduate Programmes

11 The Panel fully supports the appointment of the Associate Head of Teaching to act as overseer of the broader strategic view of PGT provision. However the Panel recommends that a dedicated programme director is appointed to the new SSB programme to work closely with the Associate Head of Teaching during the first year.

The advice of the panel is appreciated, and this matter has been discussed between the Associate Director of Teaching and the Head of School. Given the expected low intake numbers expected in year 1 of the SSB MSc Programme (2010/11), it has been agreed that a new Director of the SSB MSc will assume this role in 2011. Three suitable researchers of international standing in Systems and Synthetic Biology have been identified, and we anticipate no difficulties in finding a young faculty member to embrace this Programme.
12 The Panel recommends that the School adopts one model of project in the new programme for the first couple of years to allow for the programme to settle and develop.

*This recommendation has been adopted for at least the first year of the Programme. In second year, we will assess the need for more than one type of dissertation project (e.g. Supervisor-driven or a Group Project) depending on the number and background of the students that enrol.*

13 The Panel recommends that the School continues to consider the resolution of the impending succession issues for the two established masters programmes. The Panel was very concerned to learn that it was the active practice not to use younger members of staff for teaching on the Quantitative Genetics and Genome Analysis programme. The Panel considered this to be a serious risk to the School's capacity to manage the succession planning in the near future and detrimental to the personal development of younger staff.

The School has successfully managed any succession issues that have arisen to date for QGGA and our other programmes, but we recognize this is an ongoing issue and will become more acute if core funding cuts lead to reductions in staff numbers. To clarify the comments made about junior staff, the point made by QGGA staff refers in particular to junior research fellows in the School, who are funded externally via Career Development Awards and therefore do not have full teaching loads. They play an appropriate part in the QGGA Programme by supervising projects and some are actively involved in more formal teaching as well. Our new workload scheme aims to ensure such staff are given appropriate teaching experience and loads. There was one immediate concern about succession of teaching by one senior faculty member that was discussed at the PPR (Prof. Brian Charlesworth). We are not in a position to appoint a direct replacement, but in time staff currently on external fellowship funds will be taken on as full lecturers and can take over these courses. As an interim measure Prof. Charlesworth has agreed to continue teaching this Programme for another 3 yrs as a Senior Honorary Professorial Fellow.

14 The Panel recommends that planning for research council funding drop off should be accelerated to ensure that the School has sound contingency plans in place and will in a position to react quickly when the cuts take hold.

As well as continuing to encourage and support applications to alternative sources of funding, and encouraging creative match-funding, the Graduate School management will work with the School’s Executive Committee to plan strategically for Research Council funding drop off. As this will impact all Schools in the College this may also be a matter for discussion and planning at the College Research Training Committee.

15 The Panel recommends that consideration should be given as to how activities currently supported by Roberts funding can be sustained in the (likely) event that ring-fenced funding will be withdrawn by Research Councils in future spending reviews.
Devolved School Roberts funding is guaranteed for the academic year 2010/11 and the Postgraduate & Research Staff Officer will plan on how to sustain provision beyond that. As this will impact all Schools in the College this may also be a matter for discussion and planning at the College Research Training Committee. We understand that the Research Councils’ current plan is to continue to provide funding for the Roberts’ agenda but through a non-ring-fenced mechanism. The School wishes to ensure that such funds are directed appropriately to continue to support these activities and we understand that the University is also planning on this basis.

16 The Panel recommends that the School reviews the remit of the Postgraduate Advisors to identify where processes could be streamlined at Graduate School level and administrative tasks that could be carried out more efficiently by the administrative support team particularly at the busy points in the academic cycle.

This will be discussed at the Graduate School Committee, where possible streamlining the workload of the Institute Postgraduate Advisors. However financial pressures mean we are also having to review the School’s capacity to provide increased administrative support.

B. Recommendations to the College and the University:

1 Issues concerning the timing of notification of University funding for research students to Schools were raised by School staff. The Panel recommends that these concerns should be passed to College senior management.

The School would like to formally pass this concern on to the College Research Training Committee. Notifications of studentship monies, whilst welcome, often come much later than our recruitment and selection rounds, thus leading to significant additional work and costs to advertise and recruit than if they had been known about at an earlier stage.