

SUBJECT REVIEW REPORT

**DEPARTMENT OF
GEOGRAPHY**



**FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA**

04th to 06th July 2005

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CONTENTS

	Page
1. Subject review process	2
2. Brief History of the University and the Department	3
3. Aims and Learning Outcomes	5
3.1 Aims	5
3.2 Learning Outcomes	6
4. Observations and overall Judgement	6
4.1. Curriculum design, content and review	6
4.2. Teaching learning and assessment methods	7
4.3. Quality of students student progress and achievements	8
4.4. Extent and use of student feedback	9
4.5. Postgraduate studies	9
4.6. Peer observations	9
4.7. Skills development	9
4.8. Academic guidance and counselling	10
4.9. Overall Judgement	11
5. Conclusions and Recommendations	11

1. Subject review process

The subject review process designed by the University Grants Commission evaluates the quality of education within a specific subject or discipline, for both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, focussing on the student learning experience and on student achievement. As public institutions, universities hold and must conscientiously exercise their responsibility for quality and standards. Higher education is of crucial importance to the health, wealth and well being of the society and economy of Sri Lanka. University accountability is a key factor in promoting and safeguarding public confidence in Sri Lankan higher education. It is however understood that the final responsibility for quality and standards lies within the institution itself, not with an external body.

The present subject review process was conducted at the Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna adhering to the guidelines provided in the Quality Assurance Handbook for Sri Lankan Universities, published by the CVCD and University Grants Commission in July 2002. The review process was based on the self evaluation report (SER) submitted by the Department of Geography and supported by the knowledge and experience gained by a three-day site visit to the department. The SER consisted of

- 1) Objectives, learning outcomes and details of programmes
- 2) Design of the curriculum, content and review
- 3) Students, staff and facilities
- 4) Teaching, learning and assessment methods
- 5) Admissions, quality of students, student progress, completion and prospects of graduates
- 6) Student feedback
- 7) Postgraduate research and study programmes
- 8) Peer observation
- 9) Skills development
- 10) Academic guidance and Counselling
- 11) Conclusions

The quality of education was reviewed according to the aims and learning outcomes given in the SER and the knowledge gained through the site visit. The following eight aspects of education were reviewed at the subject level:

1. Curriculum design, content and review.
2. Teaching learning and assessment methods.
3. Quality of students including student progress and achievements.
4. Extent and use of student feedback, qualitative and quantitative.
5. Postgraduate studies.
6. Peer observations.
7. Skills development.
8. Academic guidance and counselling.

The review team visited the department from 04th – 06th July 2005. The evaluation of eight aspects was based on:

- Discussions held with the Dean, Head of department, academic staff and undergraduate students representing all four years
- Observation of department facilities (lecture rooms, GIS, survey and soil laboratories, survey equipment, cartography room, office space) and other facilities of the faculty and university (library, computer unit etc.).
- Observing teaching sessions and a practical class
- Reviewing documents available at the department, such as examination papers, marking schemes, answer scripts, practical handouts, student practical record books, term papers, final year dissertations, minutes of Departmental meetings, geographical society magazines

Each of the eight aspects was judged as good / satisfactory / unsatisfactory, noting the strengths, good practices and weaknesses in each. Based on the judgement of the eight aspects, an overall judgement was given as confidence / limited confidence / no confidence.

2. Brief History of the University and the Department

The University of Jaffna was started in 1974 as a campus of the then University of Sri Lanka and upgraded to university status in 1979. The vision of University of Jaffna is to be a leading centre of excellence in teaching, learning, research and scholarship. Mission of the university is to produce intellectual, professionally competent and capable graduates to meet the emerging needs of the national and international community with special emphasis on the social, economic and cultural needs of the Northern Sri Lanka.

At present the university has 8 Faculties and 7 Academic nits. The Faculty of Arts consists of 16 departments, covering about 30 disciplines. The Faculty awards two degrees, Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA). The student number at present is approximately 3200. The students gain entry to the faculty on the basis of their performance at the GCE (Advanced Level) examination.

The Department of Geography offers two subjects for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, namely **Geography** and **Planning**, both at general and special levels. At present a total number of about 250 students follow geography courses while about 220 students follow the courses in planning, when courses of all 4 years are considered. The total number of students enrolled for special degree programs in geography and planning are 112 and 77, respectively. The medium of instruction of all courses is Tamil.

The students are selected to read special degree programs in geography and planning on the basis of their performance in the first year. They should obtain a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) of not less than 2.7 in the main subject with not less than 1.7 in the ancillary subjects.

The department offers 4 course units in Geography and 4 course units in Planning during the two semesters in the first year. The students are required to follow all course units. In the case of general degree program, the students are required to offer 4 course units during the two semesters in the second year and another 4 course units in the two semesters of the third year, for both geography and planning. The students should have completed a total of 90 credits to be eligible for the B.A. general degree.

In the case of Special Degree programme, students in their 2nd, 3rd and 4th years, are required to offer a total of 24 compulsory core course units in the subject of their specialization (geography or planning) plus a dissertation. To obtain a B.A. Special Degree, they should collect a total of 120 credits, which includes some elective courses. The dissertation, which carries 6 credits, should be completed by the end of the second semester of the fourth year. At present the department selects a common theme of current interest as the area of study for dissertations and students are assigned different aspects of the theme for their individual dissertations.

The approved cadre for academic staff of the department is 11, of which one is yet to be filled. Of the 10 academic staff members one serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, who is involved in the teaching program as well. The department has one Senior Professor, two Associate Professors, 3 Senior Lecturers (Grade 1), and 3 Senior Lecturers (Grade 2) and 1 Probationary Lecturer. The names, educational qualifications and areas of specializations of members of academic staff are given in Table 1.

Table 1 - Names, highest qualifications, and areas of specialisation of academic staff members

Name and highest Qualification	Position (as in 01-04-2005)	Year of first appointment	Field(s) of specialization
P.Balasundarampillai PhD (Durham, UK)	SP	1967	Urban, Regional Development and Planning, Population Studies
K.Kugabalan PhD (Jaffna)	AP, HoD	1976	Population Studies, Regional Studies
R.Sivachandran M.A (Jaffna)	AP Dean	1976	Agriculture and Rural Geography
S.T.B.Rajeswaran PhD (Jaffna)	SLI	1979	Cartography, Geomorphology
K.Suthakar M.Tech (Hydrabad)	SLI	1991	Agriculture, Land use, GIS and Remote Sensing (on PhD study leave in Singapore since July 2004)
A.Antonyrajan PhD (JNU, India)	SLI	1991	Urban and Regional Planning, GIS and Remote Sensing
K.Rajendram PhD (JNU, India)	SLII	1991	Climatology and Agro Climatic Planning
A.Soosai PhD (Jaffna)	SLII	1993	Fisheries, Oceanography
L.D.Rajasooriyar PhD (East Anglia, UK)	SLII	1993	Hydrogeology, geology and environmental epidemiology
S.Uthayarasa B.A (Hons) Jaffna	PL	1999	Geomorphology

The department also has two temporary assistant lecturers and two tutors at present. However, the department has not been provided with a secretarial administrative staff member since August 2004 and a few academic staff members and the technical officer manage the administrative work. The technician and the lab attendant are the only two non-academic members serving the department.

The department occupies two floors of the Selvanayagam Block of the Faculty of Arts, but is functionally integrated. It has two lecture rooms with seating capacities of 110 and 60. It also has a practical room with a seating capacity of 60, and a soil laboratory, which has been converted into a lecture room with a seating capacity of 45. At present, the department exclusively uses the practical room and the soil laboratory, while the remaining two lecture rooms are shared with other departments. It has limited laboratory facilities and equipment. Under a CIDA funded project the department has been able to set up a GIS laboratory. However, the laboratory does not have sufficient number of computers. At present the department does not have Internet facilities. Also, it does not have a library except for a small collection of books.

3. Aims and Learning Outcomes

3.1. Aims

The Geography and Planning courses offered by the Department of Geography, University of Jaffna aim to:

- 3.1.1** Provide undergraduates the basic knowledge on fundamental principles of Geography and Planning following a series of theory courses based on a standard university Geography and Planning curriculum;
- 3.1.2** Promote knowledge on applied aspects of Geography and Planning by accommodating field survey training;
- 3.1.3** Promote knowledge and training on specialisation of regional concerns, mainly disciplines related to regional development, groundwater hydrology of limestone aquifers and agriculture and fisheries of the rural sector.
- 3.1.4** Promote skills on handling spatial data (Basic and digital cartography) and analysis;
- 3.1.5** Promote skills on understanding the applicability of the present training given in order to serve the community to meet demands of regional, national and global needs.
- 3.1.6** Encourage students who are specialising in Geography and Planning (honours degree), to contribute in academic or research carriers by focusing on community development by offering them more advanced courses and training through research projects;
- 3.1.7** Provide a friendly, responsive and supportive departmental environment that may promote enthusiastic learning.

3.2 Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of the degree programme students should have:

- 3.2.1. gained a sound knowledge and understanding in the subject of specialization (geography or planning) and its application
- 3.2.2. acquired transferable skills relevant to the subject of specialization (geography or planning)
- 3.2.3. acquired skills needed in the designing of field surveys, data collection, analysis, interpretation and representation and critical evaluation
- 3.2.4. acquired a range of personal skills including written and oral communication skills, critical, logical and analytical thinking ability, information handling and decision making skills, basic computer skills and their applicability

4. Observations and Overall Judgement

Overall judgement on the performance of the department was based on the following eight components.

4.1. Curriculum design, content and review

The review of the course content of the curriculum revealed that the content is sufficient and appropriate for a special degree programme at bachelors level. Also, it is the view of the review team that they are of relevance in the development of the country in general as well as for the northern region, in particular.

The curriculum has been revised time to time with a view of enhancing the quality of the students. The latest revision made in 2005, which included a new syllabus and a method of evaluation based on GPA system, bear evidence for this. The new curriculum enables students to take more courses from other disciplines, which in turn lead to an expansion in their knowledge base. However, the evidence of participation of all stakeholders in the development of the curriculum is lacking. **It is recommended to obtain the participation of all stakeholders in the next curriculum revision process.**

The discussion with the students revealed that the lecture time period allocated to some of the course units is not sufficient. The review team agrees with this view only in relation to one course unit, i.e. *AGYC 31023 Tropical Climatology and Geomorphology*. **It is advisable to have two separate course units for tropical Climatology and Geomorphology if possible, or else, reduce the contents of the present course.**

The review team appreciates the concept of selecting a common theme for final year dissertation as practiced in the last two years, which encourages teamwork and sharing of knowledge among students.

It is the view of the review team that the curriculum design, content and review of the department can be judged as good.

4.2. Teaching, learning and assessment methods

The common method of imparting knowledge is through delivery of lectures. Even though the medium of instruction is Tamil, it observed that in the delivery of some lectures bilingual approach is adopted with the help of transparencies. Most of the lectures were conducted according to a carefully prepared format. The review team observed that the lecturers were successful in attracting the attention of almost all students in the class. The review team appreciates the technique of teaching adopted by the lecturers such as constant interaction with students.

As indicated in the discussions held with members of the academic staff and students, it was revealed that the knowledge acquired in the classroom is supplemented by field trips, field surveys and laboratory work. Also, the student response in submitting practical exercises and tutorials is commendable. The review team also noted the prompt and careful marking of the student exercises and tutorials by the respective academic staff members.

The OHP and the blackboard seem to be the most widely used teaching aids in the classroom. However, it was noted that some lecturers depend solely on the OHP and underutilized the other teaching aids such as blackboards and whiteboards. Handouts are being utilized whenever necessary. **Since many English terms are being used in some lectures, it is advisable that handouts are prepared in English. This was also a request made by the students during the discussions review team had with them.**

A conducive learning environment was found in the classrooms. They were generally equipped with blackboards, whiteboards and overhead projectors. The main lecture hall has a microphone with speakers. All rooms are well ventilated and fitted with ceiling fans and the seating arrangements were also satisfactory.

The laboratory facilities are, however, insufficient and it is suggested that the GIS laboratory be equipped with more computers to accommodate more students at a session. The cartography room needs to be refurnished with appropriate furniture. The geology and soil laboratory does not have a sufficient collection of artefacts. Also it is the view of the review team that the map room does not have enough maps and aerial photographs. **It is recommended to take necessary steps to improve all laboratory facilities.**

The university does not encourage the policy of maintaining libraries at departmental levels. **As such, the review team wishes to recommend that the university must ensure the availability of an adequate quantity of reading material in geography and planning in the central library so that students will be able to utilize them.** The present collection of books and journals in geography and planning is hardly sufficient.

The department adopts a variety of assessment methods. A continuous assessment method is being practiced through practical exercises, tutorials and assignments. The end-semester examination, which consist of structured and essay type question papers is the main method of assessment of the theory component, and carries 75% of the total mark. The question papers of different courses reviewed by the team indicated that the standard of questions was at appropriate level. In the preparation of end-semester question papers and the correction of answer scripts, the services of second examiners are obtained. This shows the attempts adopted by the department to maintain the quality and transparency of the examination procedure. **However, the academic staff should make arrangements to release results without delay.**

It is the view of the review team that the teaching, learning and assessment methods of the department can be judged as good.

4.3. Quality of students including student progress and achievements

The review team noted that the participation of students in the learning process is fairly satisfactory. They are very attentive and, to some extent, responsive. The observation of question papers and mark sheets indicated a satisfactory level of performance by students. The leadership qualities and the ability to work in a team are indicated by the activities of the Jaffna University Geographical Society.

The discussions held with the members of the academic staff of the department revealed that the department of geography attracts good students for the specialization programme. Even though the department has produced only two graduates with first classes to date, there had been a large number of students with second class (upper division). According to the members of the staff the graduates in geography find it less difficult to secure employment compared with their counterparts in other disciplines.

However, it was noted that the department does not maintain a record of their output. **It is strongly suggested that the department should pay attention to construct a database of their graduates.**

It is the view of the review team that the quality of students, student progress and achievements of the department can be judged as good.

4.4. Extent and use of student feedback, qualitative and quantitative

At present, there is no formal method to obtain student feedback. Some staff members however use informal methods to get the feedback. The review team noted that in addition to allowing students to pose questions during the lecture time, the lecturers are also giving a question period of 5 minutes at the end of each lecture. The self-evaluation report itself has identified the need for obtaining quantitative feedback from the students. **It is suggested that the department should evolve a suitable mechanism to obtain the feedback and use it effectively to improve the quality of the teaching program.**

It is the view of the review team that the extent and use of student feedback of the department can be judged as satisfactory.

4.5. Postgraduate studies

The postgraduate study programmes at the University of Jaffna are coordinated by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Many staff members of the Department of Geography actively participate in the supervision of graduate students.

It is the view of the review team that the postgraduate studies of the department can be judged as satisfactory.

4.6. Peer observation

There is no formal mechanism of peer observation at the department. As revealed at the discussions and indicated by the self evaluation report, the senior members observe the performance of the junior members in teaching, tutorial discussions and practical sessions and guide them for any improvement in respective fields. **It is suggested to adopt a suitable method of peer observation as it helps greatly to improve the quality of the output of staff members.**

The present status of peer observation adopted by the members of the staff is judged as unsatisfactory.

4.7. Skills development

As far as subject-specific skills are concerned, the department has adopted various methods to improve the skills of their students. They have introduced new courses of study, such as GIS and Remote Sensing, which will greatly enhance the employable skills of their graduates. Also, the students are being trained to conduct independent research studies that enhance their research capabilities.

Even though the facilities are limited, the department has attempted to utilize the available resources to its fullest extent, for instance, by conducting the laboratory sessions in small numbers and repeating the session many times. This practice ensures the closer attention to students thereby paving way to improve their skills. The department obtains the services of experts outside the university with a view to supplementing the expertise available in the department in order to improve the skills of their students. For example, it was revealed at the meeting with the members of the staff that the department obtained the services of a civil engineer to train their undergraduates in surveying and levelling techniques.

The abilities of students in the organization of academic work are displayed by the continuous publication of the journal of the Geographical Society, which is in our opinion is at a high standard.

The review team however feels that the standard of English knowledge and information technology skills of students have to be improved. At the discussion with undergraduates, it was revealed that the students, especially those in the 3rd and 4th year degree classes, prefer to follow their courses in English medium. **While endorsing the view of the students, the review team, however, feels that steps in this direction should be taken gradually and carefully. Improvement of IT facilities is also urgently needed.**

It is the view of the review team that the skills development of the department can be judged as good.

4.8. Academic guidance and counselling.

Academic guidance and counselling are mainly handled at the university and faculty levels. Although the Department of Geography does not have an organized academic counselling system, the members of the staff offers counselling to students in an informal way. Few members of the academic staff of the department have served as student counsellors of the University of Jaffna in the past.

The review team is of the view that the department should make arrangements to appoint members of its staff for academic counselling at least for the students reading for special degrees in geography and planning.

The present status of academic counselling and guidance adopted by the department is judged as satisfactory.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the observations made during the study visit by the review team, the eight aspects were judged as follows:

Aspect reviewed	Judgement given
Curriculum design, content and review	Good
Teaching learning and assessment methods	Good
Quality of students including student progress and achievements	Good
Extent and use of student feedback, qualitative and quantitative	Satisfactory
Postgraduate studies	Satisfactory
Peer observations	Unsatisfactory
Skills development	Good
Academic guidance and counselling	Satisfactory

Overall Judgment - *Suspended*

In addition to the suggestions and recommendations which have been made already, the review team would like to make the following with a view to improving the quality and the relevance of the degree programme implemented by the Department of Geography, University of Jaffna.

- 5.1. Strengthen the capacity of laboratories
- 5.2. Gradual introduction of English as a medium of instruction
- 5.3. Provision of a room within the department at least for special students to increase interaction among students and between students and teachers
- 5.4. Provision of an adequate number of academic support staff
- 5.5. Make arrangements to release examination results at least within 2 months.
- 5.6. Supplying adequate quantity of stationary required for preparation of teaching aids to the academic staff
- 5.7. Provision of intercom facilities to the department
- 5.8. Provision of a bus, at least to the Faculty of Arts, so that the department could use it for field work