

# **Shaping your department's success: An audit tool for language departments in Higher Education**

John Canning

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Shaping  
THE Future  
UCML  
UNIVERSITY COUNCIL  
OF MODERN LANGUAGES

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## Abstract

Shaping a successful future for languages means shaping a successful future for language departments. This audit is designed to help staff form a holistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of their department with particular attention to 1) Institutional context and strategy, 2) Research, 3) Teaching and learning, 4) Curriculum, 5) Public engagement and 6) Staff roles and staff development. The tool helps to identify where action is needed and assists in developing an action plan to address weaknesses and consolidate existing strengths. The audit can be used by individuals as a managerial tool, but it is better suited to being used as a discussion document in a group exercise.

## Introduction

Shaping a successful future for language departments means taking advantage of all relevant opportunities and engaging with a wide range of audiences to continuously review and promote your academic offering, and meet ambitious expectations. Assessing the overall health of your department against a range of points designed to identify established good practice can help you to identify current and future opportunities as well as points of weakness and concern which need to be addressed if your department is to thrive in the longer term. An honest and ongoing appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of your department's activity will enable you and your colleagues to develop an action plan to prosper in the future.

The audit assesses six aspects of a department's activity.

1. *Institutional context and strategy.* Each institution differs in terms of its priorities, culture, organisation and ways in which it presents itself internally and externally. A department which is oblivious to its institutional context and strategy can become vulnerable, irrespective of its internal strengths and external reputation. It is also important to be sensitive to ways in which these strategies might shift as a consequence of changes in the policy environment or personnel changes at senior management level. All other aspects of this audit need to be viewed through the lens of institutional context and strategy.
2. *Research.* For some departments a research strategy will be synonymous with successful outcomes in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). For others research will play a less prominent role. In either case it is advisable to promote a research culture which encourages innovation, informs the curriculum and engages students and the wider public.
3. *Teaching and learning.* Whether an institution presents itself as 'research-led' or 'teaching-led' almost all departments teach students. An ability to be able to teach well and support student learning is critical to the ability of a department to recruit and retain students. Departments must be able to articulate the sort of skills and attributes a student will have on graduation and be aware of the sorts of career paths that graduates follow. In many institutions it is important to be able to offer teaching to students from other departments and contribute to interdisciplinary programmes. Staff need to be mindful of the overall student experience and be able to respond appropriately to questions from potential students and their parents about campus life, fees and the year abroad.
4. *Curriculum.* The curriculum needs to be appropriate for the needs and expectations of students and reviewed regularly. Developments in technology and changes in school curricula can mean the students' prior experiences and expectations are very different to

those two or three years ago. Thought needs to be given to the postgraduate, as well as the undergraduate curriculum.

5. *Public engagement.* Public engagement is part of the outreach work of the university. It can cover everything from engagement with schools and colleges to promoting the work of the university in the local, national and international media. The increasing importance being given to 'impact' in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has raised the profile of public engagement considerably over the past 2-3 years.
6. *Staff roles and staff development.* It is difficult to achieve in any of the above areas if staff are not valued, rewarded and developed adequately. Inadequate achievement in these areas can lead to low staff morale, the loss of colleagues to other institutions, underperformance in teaching and/or research, and staff lacking the skills necessary to perform their roles adequately. This section also considers the relationship staff enjoy with language colleagues in other institutions and the role they might play in raising the profile of languages nationally and internationally. Good external relationships can also benefit your own department through collaboration and sharing good practice.

## Using the audit tool<sup>1</sup>

This audit tool is designed to help department heads and other colleagues to evaluate the health of their department in its disciplinary and institutional context. The audit questions used here are intended to identify areas of activity that are regarded as important by departments and institutions. Many of these are drawn from the recommendations of Michael Worton's "*Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England*"<sup>2</sup>.

It may help you to initiate discussion and development on a particular issue, enabling you to identify the range of activities which may contribute to the issue and point to relevant resources available. And it will enable you to identify the priorities and organisational framework of your institution. In practical terms, it is intended to:

- assist in the formulation of a strategic plan to clarify how the work and profile of languages can be developed;
- identify how far and in what areas development could take place;
- give recognition to existing activity which contributes to the effective working of the department.

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<sup>1</sup>Parts of this section have been adapted and developed from the Bioscience Subject Centre audits <http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/audit.aspx>  
<sup>2</sup> M. Worton (2009) "Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England" [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_41/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_41/)

The audit should be carried out with respect to the totality of the work carried out by the department. You may wish to carry the audit out individually, as a management exercise or you may wish to bring a group of colleagues together to work on it as a process of collective reflection.

The template offers a numeric scoring system from 0-4, which allows you to reflect on whether an issue has been addressed and whether it may have been addressed to a limited extent or not at all.

1. Allocate a score between 0-4 for each of the audit questions (see Table 1). Write your answers in column A as follows.

Score	
0	The audit point has not been seriously considered or there is no activity in this area
1	The audit point has been satisfied poorly
2	The audit point is satisfied partially
3	The audit point has been satisfied adequately
4	The audit point has been satisfied optimally

2. Secondly consider each of the audit points in terms of their importance (1 to 5). Write your answers in column B (see Table 1).

Very important (5)	Achievement on this audit point is of critical importance. Failure on this point would have severe consequences for the viability and/or reputation of the department
Important (4)	Achievement on this audit point is quite important. Failure to address this point would have a significant impact on the viability and reputation of the department
Fairly important (3)	Achievement on this audit point is fairly important. Successfully addressing this point could have a positive effect on the viability and reputation of the department
Not very important (2)	Achievement on this audit point is not very important. There would not be serious consequences if this point was not addressed
Not at all important (1)	Achievement on this point is not important. There are no negative consequences of not achieving in this area

**Table 1: Audit points with example filling in.**

(A full blank version is available in Appendix 1)

		<b>Column A Score (0-4)</b>	<b>Column B Importance (0-5)</b>
	<b>Institutional context and strategy</b>		
1	The department contributes positively to the strategic objectives of the institution	3	5
2	The Modern Languages department and the Language Centre work together in a way appropriate for our institutional context	2	3
3	The institutional senior management understand that languages is both a humanities / social science discipline and an important graduate skill for students of all disciplines	4	1

When you have assessed the importance of each audit point and the extent to which it has been satisfied, place the number of the audit point into the appropriate box of the colour-coded table. For example if Audit Point 1 is very important and it has not been considered write the number “1” into the box, where the two axes meet. Blank versions are available in Appendices 1 and 2. You will probably find it easier to start with the non colour-coded version (Appendix 2).

	Very important (5)	Important (4)	Fairly important (3)	Not very important (2)	Not at all important (1)
The audit point has not been seriously considered or there is no activity in this area (0)					
The audit point has been satisfied poorly (1)		3			
The audit point is satisfied partially (2)			2		
The audit point has been satisfied adequately (3)	1				
The audit point has been satisfied optimally (4)					

When you have looked at all the audit points you will get a matrix which might look something like this:

	Very important (5)	Important (4)	Fairly important (3)	Not very important (2)	Not at all important (1)
The audit point has not been seriously considered or there is no activity in this area (0)	11	15 16 17	13	22	4
The audit point has been satisfied poorly (1)	21	3	14		23
The audit point is satisfied partially (2)		19	2	7 8 10	6
The audit point has been satisfied adequately (3)	1 12		9		5
The audit point has been satisfied optimally (4)		20			18

## Analysing the audit

Each box has been colour-coded.

- Red boxes represent the areas of highest risk. These are audit points which you recognise as being important, but that are not adequately satisfied.
- Orange boxes are areas of moderate risk.
- Green boxes are area of low risk. Audit points here are either adequately satisfied and/or are not important.

### For audit points in red consider: <sup>3</sup>

1. What possible options could be envisaged which would satisfy the audit point?
2. Do resource or other constraints make any of these options unrealistic?
3. When could appropriate changes be made?
4. Which changes would most benefit the department?
5. Can a realistic action plan be formulated to introduce these changes into the course before the next academic year?
6. Are there potential quick wins? There may be something that you or your colleagues could do very easily that would not cost a lot in terms of resources or time.
7. Are there changes that require longer term planning? Does the change require the agreement of others/resource allocation/time to implement?

### For points in orange

1. How could these audit points be moved towards or into the green zone?
2. What are the risks of these moving into the red zone?

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of this section have been adapted and developed from the Bioscience Subject Centre audits <http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/audit.aspx>

## For points in green

1. Where the audit point is satisfied adequately or optimally:
  - a. How can these strengths be maintained?
  - b. Are there any possible threats to these strengths?
  - c. What opportunities are there to share your strengths with the wider languages community in the UK?
2. Where the audit point is not satisfied adequately or optimally the audit point will be in the green area because it is not very important. Think about the likelihood that these audit points might become more important in the future.

When you have completed the review, you will find it useful to identify action points and bring them together in an action plan. An action plan template is suggested in Appendix 4. You may wish to revisit the plan on a regular basis to check on progress.

This exercise could well be repeated after a year or two to review and develop your strategy. The appendices contain the documents you will need to do your audit. You can print off as many copies you need.

## Appendix 1: Audit form

		<b>Column A Score (0-4)</b>	<b>Column B Importance (1-5)</b>
	<b>Institutional context and strategy</b>		
1	The department contributes positively to the strategic objectives of the institution		
2	The Modern Languages department and the Language Centre work together in a way appropriate for our institutional context		
3	The institutional senior management understand that languages is both a humanities / social science discipline and an important graduate skill for students of all disciplines		
4	Senior management provides sufficient support to the department to develop in ways appropriate to the institutional context		
5	The institutional internationalisation strategy recognises the importance of modern foreign languages		
6	We are able to articulate our department's values throughout the university		

		Column A Score (0-4)	Column B Importance (1-5)
	<b>Research</b>		
7	We have a departmental research strategy		
8	Staff are encouraged to develop their research in new directions		
9	We adequately publicise our research within and outside the university		
10	Postgraduate researchers are integrated into the department's research culture		
11	We engage students with our research interests		
	<b>Teaching and Learning</b>		
12	We are able to identify the attributes of a languages graduate		
13	We recognise and promote languages both as a humanities / social science discipline and as an important graduate skill for students of all disciplines		
14	Students are able to access appropriate library and learning resources		

		<b>Column A Score (0-4)</b>	<b>Column B Importance (1-5)</b>
15	The department makes appropriate use of technologies and social networking tools to enhance student learning		
16	We can articulate what residence abroad contributes to the student experience of learning		
17	We can answer questions about fees, loans, accommodation and campus life from potential students and their parents		
18	We liaise pro-actively with the Careers Service to ensure that skills development is an integral and important part of our programmes at all levels		
19	Employers have input into our curriculum		
20	Study abroad opportunities are widely available and are promoted to students studying a range of disciplines		

		Column A Score (0-4)	Column B Importance (1-5)
	<b>Curriculum<sup>4</sup></b>		
21	Our teaching provision is fit for the 21st century		
22	Our curriculum is reviewed in its entirety at regular intervals		
23	We have a healthy level of recruitment for our masters and doctoral postgraduate programmes		
24	We work collaboratively with other departments in recruiting and supporting postgraduate students		
25	Postgraduate researchers have opportunities to engage with researchers from other departments		
26	Staff and students make use of appropriate technologies for the teaching and learning of languages		
27	We take every opportunity to teach students studying other subjects		

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<sup>4</sup> You may find the resources from the Language Network for Quality Assurance (LANQUA) useful [www.lanqua.eu](http://www.lanqua.eu)

		Column A Score (0-4)	Column B Importance (1-5)
	<b>Public engagement</b>		
28	We speak to the media when opportunities arise in our areas of expertise		
29	We engage the local community with our research		
30	We enjoy good relationships with local, national and international employers		
31	We are committed to increasing the diversity of our students		
32	We actively engage with local schools and further education colleges		
33	We input into the school curriculum through engagement with Languages ladder and/or public examinations (e.g. GCSE, A-level, Higher, Baccalaureate)		
	<b>Staff and staff development</b>		
34	Our department rewards excellence in teaching and learning		
35	Our department rewards excellence in research		

		<b>Column A Score (0-4)</b>	<b>Column B Importance (1-5)</b>
36	Our department rewards excellence in academic citizenship		
37	We enjoy good relationships with languages colleagues in other institutions		
38	We regard colleagues who work in language fields outside our own as part of our disciplinary community		
39	Our staff profile is healthy in terms of gender, ethnic group and age diversity		
40	Staff have access to staff development opportunities to develop their teaching		
41	We offer specialist support to teaching staff who are new to UK higher education		

## Appendix 2: Audit assessment (colour-coded)

	Very important (5)	Important (4)	Fairly important (3)	Not very important (2)	Not at all important (1)
The audit point has not been seriously considered or there is no activity in this area (0)					
The audit point has been satisfied poorly (1)					
The audit point is satisfied partially (2)					
The audit point has been satisfied adequately (3)					
The audit point has been satisfied optimally (4)					

## Appendix 3: Audit assessment (non colour-coded)

You may find it easier to write on this non colour-coded version in the first instance.

	<b>Very important (5)</b>	<b>Important (4)</b>	<b>Fairly important (3)</b>	<b>Not very important (2)</b>	<b>Not at all important (1)</b>
The audit point has not been seriously considered or there is no activity in this area (0)					
The audit point has been satisfied poorly (1)					
The audit point is satisfied partially (2)					
The audit point has been satisfied adequately (3)					
The audit point has been satisfied optimally (4)					

## Appendix 4: Action plan

As well as identifying the actions which need to be taken, make a note of the resources you will need, whose help will be required and the timescale for action

Action (you can add as many action points as you need)	Resources needed. E.g. finance, who is going to responsible?	Whose help is required?	Timescale for action	Comments on progress
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				

Action (you can add as many action points as you need)	Resources needed. E.g. finance, who is going to be responsible?	Whose help is required?	Timescale for action	Comments on progress
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				