

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, CORK**

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT/QUALITY ASSURANCE

PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

ACADEMIC YEAR 2007/08

16th June 2008

PEER REVIEW GROUP MEMBERS

Peer Review Group
Professor Stephen Hill Head of Research, Business School, University of Glamorgan, UK <i>(Chair)</i>
Professor Bernadette Andreosso-O'Callaghan Senior Professor of Economics, University of Limerick, Ireland
Ms. Pat Salisbury Head of Group Human Resources, FEXCO, Ireland
Professor Steve Hedley Department of Law, UCC <i>(Rapporteur)</i>
Professor Ken Higgs, Department of Geology, UCC

TIMETABLE OF THE SITE VISIT

The timetable for the site visit is attached as Appendix A.

PEER REVIEW

Methodology

The Peer Review Group convened on the first evening and considered the Self-Evaluation Report, the purposes of the review, the timetable and how the Group would work. Professor Stephen Hill was appointed Chair of the Peer Review Group by the Group and Professor Steve Hedley agreed to be the Rapporteur. The Group discussed issues of concern and how they would function over the duration of the site visit.

Site Visit

The Peer Review Group conducted the site visit according to the timetable in Appendix A. The reviewers met staff, students, senior officers and external stakeholders and considered the commentary in the self-evaluation report from the

point of view of all of these groups. The Peer Review Group noted that the office and computing facilities of the Department are split over three distinct sites with a significant distance between them. Because of restrictions on time the members of the Group split up for some of the meetings. At all times at least one external member of the Group was present at all meetings. The times when this occurred are clearly indicated in the attached timetable.

The reviewers found the timetable to be appropriate and adequate for the purposes of the review. The Peer Review Group was facilitated in every way during the site visit by the Department and the University, and are grateful for the guidance and hospitality received.

Peer Review Group Report

The review team prepared an initial draft during the afternoon and evening of the second day of the site visit and agreed all recommendations for improvement. The report was finalised via email communications subsequent to the site visit. All members of the Peer Review Group concur with the final report.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

The Department is highly active and effective in teaching and has clear research potential. The staff of the Department have made significant investments of time and effort over the past ten years in developing excellent quality undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses and programmes. The time is now opportune for the Department to realise its research potential alongside this teaching excellence. Most staff are enthusiastic, motivated and highly committed, and have been instrumental in developing new programmes. Staff are committed to the continued development of innovative new programmes and schemes. The Department is a major contributor to the programmes of other Departments and Colleges in UCC, with a healthy student demand for programmes over time. Consequently the Department makes a substantial contribution to the revenues of the University.

Self-Evaluation Report

The Peer Review Group was supplemented by an extensive collection of documentation. The Self-Evaluation Report was detailed and provided a

comprehensive picture of the activities of Department. Some information was absent from the submitted documentation and the Peer Review Group were subsequently provided with additional information. This included a further set of staff recommendations tabled by the Head of Department during the site visit.

While the documentation provided was reasonably comprehensive, the Peer Review Group found that the analysis of the Department's current situation was sparse, and perhaps not as helpful in identifying opportunities and potential for future development as it might have been.

SWOT Analysis

There was evidence of engagement by all staff of the Department in the SWOT exercise. The swot analysis conducted by the Department was helpful but was limited in scope. In particular, a careful assessment of the Department's market position would have assisted the deliberations of the Peer Review Group. The Peer Review Group developed their own summary of key elements, provided below:

Strengths

- student focus
- excellent feedback on teaching capability
- quality of student experience
- accessibility and availability of staff to students
- large number of enthusiastic young staff, auguring well for Departmental future
- very good student full-time equivalents numbers
- a strong portfolio of teaching across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- the contribution made to teaching across the university, not just confined to College of Business & Law programmes
- critical mass of economics staff

- a new staff development programme, that has been very successful in achieving new PhD completions

Weaknesses

- little evidence, as yet, of a significant research culture, reflected in the relative lack of both research outputs and external research funding
- poor physical infrastructure
- multi-site location of offices and teaching facilities, reducing both operational effectiveness and departmental cohesion
- limited administrative capacity, impinging on academic time
- given the size of the Department, there is a considerable potential to both make more contribution to, and exercise greater influence on, the running of the University
- proportion of senior appointments to junior and the diversity of appointed staff
- absence of formal communications within the Department
- translation of new PhD achievement into research output is not yet fully exploited

Opportunities

- there are considerable opportunities for national and international research collaboration (not currently being realised to their full potential)
- for research collaboration within and without the university
- for influencing university opinion by giving an economic dimension to policy discussion (again, not being fully realised)
- to enhance the number of staff with research of national and international significance
- including the filling of approved senior posts

Threats

- the past appears to permeate thinking within the Department.
- there is a continuing failure to fill approved senior posts

- the continued failure to achieve promotion can have a demoralising effect across Department
- the failure to attract appropriate external candidates for approved posts
- the Department is under-resourced in financial terms and needs to retain more of its generated revenues
- the uncertainty surrounding the position of Economics in the new restructuring exercise of the university
- staff may either not have the appropriate opportunities or may not be making the most of opportunities to engage in critical debate

Benchmarking

The Peer Review Group considered the reports on the benchmarking exercise carried out by the Department in relation to the University of St Andrews in Scotland and the National University of Ireland Maynooth. The reports were highly descriptive in nature, with a lack of the comparative analysis required from such an exercise. Critical benchmarking is more than a description of cognate institutions, and effective aspirational benchmarking requires detailed comparative analysis to derive the most benefit in terms of enhancing both practice and achievement in the Department.

FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP

Department Details

The Peer Review Group noted the staff profile in the Department and considered that the proportion of fixed term staff to permanent staff is too high given the stability of student numbers. The grade distribution among both academic and administrative staff was not appropriate for the size of the Department, and for expectations in relation to the delivery of missions and goals.

The physical facilities available to the Department are less than ideal and require refurbishment to an appropriate standard. The Peer Review Group also noted that the current facilities are not appropriate for disabled access, and fail to meet the standards required by contemporary best practice.

Department Organisation & Planning

The Department seeks to provide the opportunity for staff to become engaged in the development of policies and strategies. There has been some formalisation reflected in the committee structure of the Department. The initiative to appoint and develop Programme Directors is welcomed. The Department is organised around three strategic teaching/research groups. There is some danger of developing independent units with little cross-unit co-operation so that opportunities for inter-group collaboration may not be realised.

The School had in place an excellent Advisory Board, and there was some evidence of taking cognisance of external views in the development and delivery of teaching programmes.

The Department has a committed and hardworking administrative team, although the career development path, if any, for administrative staff is unclear. The uneven grade profile of academic staff was reflected in administrative grades.

There are concerns about the split location of the Departmental staff and the difficulties of maintaining Departmental cohesion under these circumstances. It is difficult to maintain a consistent Departmental identity given the split location of Departmental facilities.

The Peer Review Group noted the importance of transparency and comparability in workload allocations. The Department is encouraged to fully engage in the university debate on academic workload models.

Teaching & Learning

The Department has been very successful in the development of a student focus. However there are legitimate concerns that future teaching and scholarly activity be appropriately research informed. More Departmental staff should be encouraged to take advantage of continuing professional education in relation to teaching and learning support. A handful of staff have benefited from excellent university support.

Some concern was expressed by students as to the effectiveness of the module evaluation process. Best practice suggests that student evaluations should be conducted independently of the relevant teaching staff and the results of this

evaluation be made available to Programme Directors, as well as to individual teaching staff.

Students expressed concern that at the very time the intellectual content becomes more challenging tutorial support becomes unavailable. The Department needs to give serious consideration to the introduction of final year tutorials/small group seminars.

Students would like to have earlier career guidance and better information as to the consequences of subject choices and second year examination results.

Research & Scholarly Activity

The Peer Review Group observed some evidence of excellence in research and scholarly activity in relation to a small proportion of staff. However relatively few staff are currently achieving the research outputs and external research funding compatible with the University's aspirations to be a world-class regional university. This may reflect the need to develop an enhanced research culture to sit alongside established excellence in teaching. The Peer Review Group noted that the Department strategy had been to establish a student-focussed approach towards achieving excellence in teaching. The Peer Review Group noted that the Department recognises the need to develop and apply a comprehensive research strategy to tackle the paucity of external research funding (with one notable exception) and the delivery of research outputs in line with the University's planned introduction of key performance indicators in research, thereby developing a more focused research culture.

The current level of departmental research output is the reflection of a number of influences. In moving forward, the Department must have a clearly worked research strategy with an emphasis on increasing the quality and quantity of research output and on attracting significant external research funding. One important element of this research strategy must be the development of further inter-Departmental, inter-university and international collaborations, encouraged and endorsed by senior Departmental staff.

The perceived lack of research time is a common obstacle to developing and improving the research culture. The staff of the Department have yet to make appropriate use of the university sabbatical leave system and should be encouraged

and facilitated in doing so. The Department needs to explore ways of utilising this facility.

The importance of research-based teaching excellence is set to increase, in Ireland as elsewhere. In preparing to meet this new metrics based environment, the Department must begin to develop the research culture that will deliver research outputs and external funding commensurate with its critical mass, and without undermining its achieved teaching excellence. This is a difficult balancing act, requiring both committed leadership and the active engagement and participation of all staff.

It is academic debate and criticality that is the foundation of both research and teaching excellence. There are concerns that staff may either not have the appropriate opportunities, or may not be making the most of available opportunities, to engage in critical debate.

Staff Development

Staff development must be at the heart of the annual performance management system. All staff are entitled to annual appraisal and tailored guidance, including the identification and subsequent realisation of staff development opportunities. For example, the criteria for promotion are widely advertised in the university, and staff should be encouraged and guided to examine the criteria and identify opportunities to meet them.

External Relations

As noted in the Self-Evaluation Report, there is considerable opportunity to enhance the influence and contribution of the Department in its relations with the university. The Peer Review Group fully endorse this conclusion.

The Peer Review Group complimented the Department on its 'China initiative' – it is very welcome and has considerable potential for development and growth. This is especially important since the Department needs to get more involved in external activities, and needs to seek more external views. In particular, despite some good practice, the Department needs to further raise its international profile through a programme of teaching and research collaborations.

There is some evidence (such as the Advisory Board) of engagement with business, but this is not yet at a level appropriate to the size of the department. Further relations with business needs to be developed.

Support Services

The reviewers noted the excellent facilities provided by the UCC Library, and the associated computing facilities that the students have full access to.

Governance

All Departments within the College of Business & Law face considerable uncertainty in the absence of the appointment of a Head of College of Business & Law and the general uncertainty as to how the College is to be structured. The University should make the appointment of a Head of College a matter of priority, in order to reduce that uncertainty, and to allow the development of strategic and operational plans in line with the University Strategic Framework.

Staffing

The Department has a predominantly young and local profile. Nationalising and internationalising that profile is essential for continued improvement, and for delivery in terms of strategic aims and objectives, especially in relation to the enhancement and further development of a research culture. It is important to any academic department to have access to a wide range of experiences, expertises, cultures and diversity. It is essential that future appointments including at a senior level, be both marketed extensively and competitively positioned in a global market.

The uneven administrative grade profile parallels that of academic staff. The development of a research culture is likely to require the reduction of the administrative workload currently undertaken by academic staff. The university must work with the Department in ensuring appropriate administrative structures – both in terms of grades and numbers.

Accommodation

Multi-site location is a problem. In addition the standard of accommodation at the main site is not appropriate to the aspirations of the Department and the University. There is an urgent need for refurbishment and quality improvement in the facilities.

Financing

The Department needs to retain a greater proportion of its generated revenue. It is wholly inappropriate that a Department making such a high level contribution to University revenues should continually struggle to maintain its operational effectiveness because of its lack of discretionary spending. Such stringency may ultimately have negative impact on university revenues, so current practice is both ineffective and short-sighted.

Communications.

Critical debate is at the heart of academic development. It is essential that the policies and processes of the Department are subject to discussion and challenge, and that all staff are encouraged to express their views in an open and constructive environment.

Departmental Co-ordinating Committee & Methodology employed in the preparation of the Self-Evaluation Report

In preparing the Self-Evaluation Report the Department had established two coordinating committees and work was allocated out between them. All staff participated in the process, and the final report was completed approximately three weeks before the review visit. The Peer Review Group noted that the staff of the Department had been offered an opportunity to comment on the first draft of the Self-Evaluation Report, but did not receive a copy of the final report until after their first meeting with the Peer Review Group. The Peer Review Group also confirmed that a SWOT analysis exercise had been conducted and that an effort had been made to benchmark the Department against two other institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Peer Review Group noted and carefully considered the recommendations made in the Self-Evaluation Report and also the supplementary departmental recommendations tabled by the Head of Department during the site visit.

The Peer Review Group recommends that:

1. the proportion of senior staff, in the Department, needs to increase as a matter of priority. Such a low proportion deprives the Department, its senior management and other staff and students, of experience, expertise and critical debate
2. it is imperative that positions at senior levels, already approved by the University, be filled as a matter of urgency
3. future academic appointments must be both marketed internationally and internationally competitive
4. staff need to be supported and guided in meeting the criteria for promotion in the university
5. the Department needs to develop a research culture that is consistent with its established excellence in teaching
6. the Department needs to engage fully with the ongoing university debate on role, development and measurement of research in a world-class regional university
7. the policies, practices and strategies of the Department must be subject to discussion and challenge at regular fora, enabling and facilitating constructive criticism
8. the Department needs to retain a greater proportion of its generated revenues
9. the physical infrastructure available to the Department needs to be improved in order to allow the Department to deliver its agenda
10. the University should address the issues arising from the split site operation and its consequences for Departmental effectiveness and cohesion
11. the University should make the appointment to the post of Head of College of Business & Law immediately
12. student evaluations should be conducted independently and regularly, and should be considered by the programme directors, with subsequent actions taken and reported back to the students.

Appendix A

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT TIMETABLE

In Summary

- Monday 21 April: The Peer Review Group arrives at the Kingsley Hotel for a briefing from the Director of the Quality Promotion Unit, followed by a meal with representatives from the Department.
- Tuesday 22 April: The Peer Review Group further considers the Self-Evaluation Report and meets with departmental staff and student and stakeholder representatives. A working private dinner is held that evening for the Peer Review Group.
- Wednesday 23 April: The Peer Review Group meets with relevant senior officers of UCC. An exit presentation is given by the Peer Review Group to all members of the department. A working private dinner is held that evening for the Peer Review Group. This is the final evening of the review.
- Thursday 24 April: External Peer Review Group members depart

Monday 21 April 2008															
16.00 – 18.00	Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan. Group agrees final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following 2 days, including selection of Chair and Rapporteur. Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.														
19.00	Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and Head of Department and representatives from the Department. Departmental Representatives: <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Ms. Jane Bourke</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Professor Connell Fanning</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dr. Declan Jordan</td> <td>Dr. Catherine Kavanagh</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mr. Daniel Kiely</td> <td>Dr. Siobhan Lucey</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ms. Mary Maguire</td> <td>Ms. Erica Murphy</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Ms. Aileen Murphy</td> <td>Dr. Eoin O’Leary</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mr. Niall O’Sullivan</td> <td>Dr. Geraldine Ryan</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Dr. Ed Shinnick</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Ms. Jane Bourke	Professor Connell Fanning	Dr. Declan Jordan	Dr. Catherine Kavanagh	Mr. Daniel Kiely	Dr. Siobhan Lucey	Ms. Mary Maguire	Ms. Erica Murphy	Ms. Aileen Murphy	Dr. Eoin O’Leary	Mr. Niall O’Sullivan	Dr. Geraldine Ryan	Dr. Ed Shinnick	
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Ms. Aileen Murphy	Dr. Eoin O’Leary														
Mr. Niall O’Sullivan	Dr. Geraldine Ryan														
Dr. Ed Shinnick															
Tuesday 22 April 2008															
Venue: Aras na Laoi 2.01															
08.30 – 09.00	Convening of Peer Review Group and further consideration of Self-Evaluation Report														

09.00 – 09.30	Meeting with Professor Connell Fanning, Head of Department	
09.30 – 10.30	<u>Meeting with Staff of the Department to outline process and seek engagement</u> Ms. Michele Barry Mr. Daniel Blackshields Ms. Jane Bourke Ms. Lee-Ann Burke Mr. Robert Butler Mr. Seamus Coffey Dr. John Considine Ms. Joan Corcoran Mr. Frank Crowley Dr. Eleanor Doyle Mr. John Eakins Professor Connell Fanning Ms. Sinead Foley Ms. Lisa Hickey Dr. Declan Jordan Dr. Catherine Kavanagh Dr. Ella Kavanagh Ms. Rosemary Kelleher Mr. Daniel Kiely Ms. Ann Kirby Ms. Siobhan Lavery Dr. Siobhan Lucey Ms. Mary Maguire Mr. John Masson Ms. Breffney McCarthy Ms. Nóirín McCarthy Dr. Brendan McElroy Ms. Aileen Murphy Ms. Erica Murphy Mr. Andrew O'Brien Mr. Donal O'Brien Mr. Owen O'Brien Ms. Marie O'Connor Dr. Eoin O'Leary Mr. Niall O'Sullivan Mr. Richard O'Sullivan Dr. Bernadette Power Ms. Jane Power Dr. Geraldine Ryan Ms. Meadhbh Sherman Dr. Edward Shinnick Mr. Brian Turner Mr. Don Walshe Ms. Edel Walsh	
10.30 – 11.00	Tea/coffee	
11.00 – 13.00	<u>Private meetings with staff</u> <u>Peer Review Group Members: Hill, Salisbury, Higgs</u> 11.00 Ms. Joan Corcoran 11.15 Dr. Eleanor Doyle 11.30 Dr. Declan Jordan 11.45 Ms. Mary Maguire 12.00 Mr. Owen O'Brien 12.15 Dr. Eoin O'Leary 12.30 Mr. Niall O'Sullivan 12.45 Dr. Edward Shinnick Venue: Aras na Laoi 2.01	<u>Private meetings with staff</u> <u>Peer Review Group Members: Andreosso-O'Callaghan, Hedley</u> 11.00 Dr. Siobhan Lucey 11.15 Ms. Rosemary Kelleher 11.30 Dr. Catherine Kavanagh 11.45 Mr. Andrew O'Brien Others as invited Venue: Aras na Laoi 1.42
13.00 – 14.00	Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group	
14.00 – 14.30	Visit to core facilities of Department, escorted by Professor Connell Fanning, Head & Ms Mary Maguire, Department Manager	
14.30 – 15.15	<u>Representatives of 1st and 2nd Year Students</u> Caoimhe de Brun (1 st Finance) Greg Higgins (1 st Arts) Brian Foley (1 st Commerce, Spanish) David Kilcommins (2 nd Finance) Louise McCarthy (2 nd Commerce) Ross O'Dwyer (1 st Commerce) Colm O'Mahoney (2 nd Arts) James O'Sullivan (1 st Commerce, French) Sean Roberti (1 st Computer Science)	
15.15 – 15.30	Tea/coffee break	
15.30 – 16.15	<u>Representatives of Final Year Students</u> Kieran Connery (4 th Commerce) Ian Cooney (3 rd Commerce)	

	Margaret Donnellan (3 rd GPP) Peter Lynch (3 rd Arts) Chris O'Keefe (4 th Commerce)	Danny Goold (4 th Finance) Caroline O'Brien (3 rd Arts) Miriam Twohig (3 rd Finance)
16.15 – 16.45	<u>Representatives of Graduate Students</u> Danny Blake (PG Dip Health & Evaluation Studies) Donnacha Duggans (PG Dip Business Economics) Jason Foran (PhD Economics) Sinead Hayes (MA Economics – Health Stream) Ger Neenan (MA Economics – International Business Stream) Michele Ryan (MBS Business Economics) John Twomey (MSc Financial Economics)	
17.00 – 18.30	<u>Representatives of stakeholders</u> Ms. Glynis Casey, AIB, Graduate Ms. Carol Laffan, University of Limerick, Graduate Ms. Chen Zheng, representative of Henan University of Finance and Economics (HUFE), China.	
19.00	Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day, followed by a working private dinner for members for the Peer Review Group	
Wednesday 23 April 2008		
Venue: Aras na Laoi 2.01		
08.30 – 08.55	Convening of Peer Review Group	
08.55 – 09.15	Professor Grace Neville, Vice-President for Teaching and Learning	
09.15 – 10.15	Professor David Cox, Head of College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences Professor Denis Lucey, Acting Head, College of Business & Law Professor Neil Collins, Dean, Faculty of Commerce	
10.15 – 11.15	(Andreosso-O'Callaghan, Hedley:) Visit to UCC Library, meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services, Ms. Rose Buttimer and Ms. Ger Prendergast, Subject Librarians (Hill, Salisbury, Higgs:) Open meeting with Departmental staff	
11.15 – 11.30	Tea/coffee	
11.30 – 11.45	Mr. Cormac McSweeney, Finance Office	
11.45 – 12.15	Ms. Anne Gannon, Recruitment Manager, Human Resources	
12.15 – 12.45	Dr. David O'Connell, Office of the Vice-President for Research Policy and Support (representing the VP for Research, Policy and Support)	
12.45 – 13.45	Working lunch	
13.45 – 14.15	Professor Connell Fanning, Head of Department	
14.15 – 17.00	Preparation of first draft of final report (tea/coffee at 15.30)	

17.00 – 17.30	Exit presentation made to all departmental staff by the Chair of the Peer Review Group, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group.
19.00	Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to complete drafting of report and finalise arrangements for completion and submission of final report.