

**University College Cork  
National University of Ireland, Cork**

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**Department of French**

**Academic Year 2001/02**

### ***Members of the Peer Review Group:***

Professor Pádraig Ó Riain, Department of Early and Medieval Irish, UCC  
(Chair)

Professor Seán Ó Coileáin, Department of Modern Irish, UCC

Professor Pádraig Ó Gormáile, Department of French, NUIG

Professor Jean Brihault, Department d'Anglais, Université de Rennes, France

### ***Timetable of the site visit***

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

The timetable was found to be suitable and adequate.

### **Peer Review**

#### ***Methodology:***

Teaching and Research were the areas of primary responsibility of the two external members, but the report as a whole reflects the consensus views of all four members.

#### ***Self-Assessment Report:***

The SAR was considered to be exceptionally complete and did not appear to have omitted any relevant issue.

### ***Findings of the Peer Review Group***

#### ***Department Details***

The Department of French is one of the larger departments of UCC and, up to five years ago, when the number of students began to decline in line with a trend in some continental language departments at UCC and elsewhere, it had undergone a period of sustained growth, making it the largest undergraduate centre for French in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. Its mission is to teach French language and literature, linguistics, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the data on student numbers, as provided by UCC and considered by the Peer Review Group, did not include students studying abroad for the year {BComm Euro III, BA

studies, society, thought and institutions, and it enjoys a considerable reputation at home and abroad. Its staff members are, without exception, proud to belong to the Department and, to judge by the comments of their representatives, there is a general air of contentment with courses among the students. Owing to expansion over the last five years, which involved the creation of a number of inter-faculty courses (BCL; Law and French, BComm (European) with French), the range of the Department's courses and the variety of its students have increased considerably. To judge by our interviews with the Dean of Commerce and the representative of the Dean of Law, the new inter-faculty courses have been very successful, not least because of the willingness of the Department to provide 'customised' courses for students from the other faculties.

The Department's work is complicated by the need to place students abroad in 'partner' francophone universities, which entails a very heavy administrative workload. Everything would seem to indicate that this work is carried out in a very efficient manner.

### ***Language Centre and the French Department***

Since the CLTs play an integral role in the teaching mission of the Department, the PRG welcomes the pending review of the Language Centre and the possibility this raises of integration of CLTs in the Language Departments. In the meantime, it recommends that special attention be paid to the support and working conditions of the staff of the Language Centre. The status of the CLTs is a very important issue for all concerned and re-assignment to the French Department would forge a new feeling of identity among the CLTs with their academic colleagues. The importance of the role of the CLTs in delivering language teaching to a range of programmes should not be under-estimated and immediate attention should be paid to the facilities required by them. As part of a possible integration of the CLTs, the Department's language-teaching mission should receive greater emphasis.

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(LCS) with French III, BA (European Studies) III}. Some students included in the data were registered for courses in French organised by the Language Centre and thus are not the direct responsibility of the Department of French.

## *Department Organisation & Planning*

The Deans of the three Faculties in which the Department offers courses to degree level expressed their appreciation of its efficiency and adaptability. Internally, however, departmental organisation and planning have in the past tended to be centralized which raises the issue of the responsibilities and authority of committees within the Department. The PRG notes with approval strategic recommendation 76 of the SAR concerning a collective departmental approach to matters such as research initiatives, and feels that this should be extended to include the empowerment of such groups as staff responsible for language teaching to make recommendations, for example concerning changes, to departmental staff meetings with a strong presumption of acceptance. Every effort should be made to introduce rotation of responsibilities among all staff in relation to departmental Committees, the composition of which should be the subject of regular review. In the same way, all workloads should be made known and reviewed regularly.

When implemented, measures such as those envisaged by recommendations 7-9 of the SAR will bring about increased collegiality, create a better working environment, and integrate staff into the decision-making process and its implementation. This should also lead to a considerable improvement in dissemination of information within the Department, for example, in relation to the allocation of the Department's budget. The PRG realises that this can apply only where appropriate information has been made available by central administration. Delay in receiving budgetary information from central administration has made it difficult in the past to frame departmental policy.

The growing volume and complexity of the work of the administrative office staff in the Department is not always fully understood by other members of staff. We endorse the recommendations of the SAR regarding the formal identification of the tasks of administrative staff (§§ 33-35), including the proposal that their role should be extended to the provision of support for other staff in relation to the operation of departmental committees and research initiatives, or, where it already exists, the strengthening of this report. Where members of the Department are asked

to assume University responsibilities on or outside campus, both University and Department need to address the implications of these added responsibilities for the administrative support staff.

The PRG strongly supports recommendation 20 of the SAR that staff achievements be acknowledged and celebrated openly. With a view to implementing this recommendation a ‘hospitality function’ should be assumed by a member of staff as part of his/her share of the Department’s administrative load. In sum, every opportunity should be taken to create a favourable atmosphere in the Department.

### ***Teaching & Learning***

The PRG was impressed by the range and quality of courses offered by the Department. It was also impressed by the level of general satisfaction with courses and with the teaching of staff expressed by students of the Department. It noted with approval the success of the Department in ‘customizing’ courses, for example in relation to the BCL (Law and French). It welcomes the introduction of such innovative teaching methods as the literary seminar in the final year, and acknowledges with satisfaction the considerable increase in the number of students taking advantage of the year abroad option.

The PRG feels that, when implemented, the following recommendations would benefit the Department.

- Since some academic staff appear to have no involvement in language-teaching, the policy underlying this should be clarified. The structures within the University should not be allowed to hinder the greater integration of content- and language-teaching.
- There does not appear to be a departmental policy with regard to the use of French in the teaching of content courses. The PRG recommends that, bearing in mind its overall mission, the Department consider producing such a policy.

- Every effort should be made to communicate more effectively to students the level of continuity within the programmes of years 1-4. In this respect, special consideration should be given to the appropriate employment of native and non-native speakers of French in the various teaching functions.
- More use should be made of the many (mostly already available) means of enhancing the teaching of the language, such as language laboratories, the provision of Computer Aided Learning (CAL), the use of the Media Room, the revitalization of the French Society, and the creation of a French CineClub. Students should be made more fully aware of the availability and potential benefits of these resources, especially in relation to the building up their confidence when speaking French.
- In line with recommendation 47 of the SAR, the Department should seriously consider the possibility of providing remedial language teaching.
- Since joint honours students normally experience difficulty in availing of the year abroad option, every effort should be made to integrate it into their programme. Moreover, since some students do not appear to perceive the year abroad as a continuation of the Department's teaching programme, every effort should be made to remedy this.
- The Department should ensure that all staff receive encouragement to visit the students abroad by availing of the funds available from the International Education Office to assist in these visits.

### ***Research & Scholarly Activity***

As can be seen by the number and quality of the books and articles it has produced, as well as the regular attendance of its staff members at international conferences, the Department can be proud of its strong record in the areas of research and scholarly activity. A contributory factor to the Department's rate of success in research has been its policy of distributing workloads so as to ensure that one day per week is free for research. The research seminar, which, as is recognised in Recommendation 82 of the SAR, is to be regarded as a fixed area of activity funded from the departmental budget, has also helped to produce a favourable research environment. The interdisciplinary character of much of the research involvement

of staff is also to be highly commended. All this has doubtless contributed to the Department's success in attracting Government of Ireland research funding at staff level, and in developing and maintaining international networks.

The PRG is eager to ensure that the considerable scholarly reputation now enjoyed by the Department be maintained and, in this context, notes with concern the lack of recent success in attracting PhD students to the Department. The relatively low funding of the Department's part time staffing budget has undoubtedly had an adverse influence and the PRG is anxious that this situation be addressed. In the meantime, consideration should be given to the revival of the M.A. in Translation Studies, and more attention should be paid to the availability of the Co-Tutelle scheme as a means of attracting doctoral students.

### ***Staff Development***

The arrangements for sabbatical leave within the Department, which allow two staff members to be away at any one time, are to be highly commended. However, in view of the proven research achievements of staff, it is a matter of concern and surprise that staff applications for promotion have been unsuccessful in recent years.

The PRG considers the staff development support available for CLTs to be grossly inadequate, and will recommend that the University consider defining a strategy for the provision of more development support for this category of staff.

### ***External Relations***

The PRG was impressed by the extent of involvement of members of the Department in University Committees, at all levels from the Governing Body to Faculties. The Department has also provided an Ombudsman in the recent past. The central role played by the Department in the development of Europe-related activities, through Erasmus and Socrates, is to be commended, as are the extensive external links maintained by some members of staff with francophone Canada and Europe in regard not only to teaching and research but also to exchanges of visiting

lecturers. All staff members should be encouraged to participate in, and take advantage of, the teaching-staff exchange scheme funded by the Socrates programme.

### ***Support Services***

It seemed to the PRG that student access to computers and appropriate software is, in practice, very limited. It is also apparent that, where the provision of computer hardware is concerned, because of the present structural arrangement, an unhelpful distinction is made between academic staff and CLTs.

### ***Departmental Co-ordinating Committee & Methodology employed in the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report***

Although mainly written by the Head of Department, who unstintingly gave of his time over the last few months in co-ordinating, with the assistance of a fully representative departmental Committee, the Department's preparations for the visit, the SAR comprehensively reflects the Department's assessment of its present position and vision of its future development. The Report contains no fewer than 88 recommendations, some of which reflect decisions already taken by the Department but not yet implemented; while special mention is made here of particular recommendations, the PRG is pleased to endorse all 88. The level of documentation accompanying the Report, including two volumes of staff questionnaires, is an appropriate measure of the fullness of the Department's self-evaluation.

During the visit of the PRG to the Department, no attempt was made to hinder due process. The Head absented himself during the staff meeting, in which all staff, including CLTs and administrative staff, participated. The PRG is very grateful to individual members of staff for their honest and frank discussions with it of departmental affairs. It is also indebted to the individual students who articulated very cogently the student view of the Department.



### *Recommendations to UCC*

As is clear from the foregoing, the French Department has many strengths, in teaching, in staff-student relations, in research activity, external relations, inclusiveness in relation to attendance at staff meetings vis-à-vis CLTs, and, as is shown by the SAR, in overall capacity to respond to the need to review and, where necessary, emend the Department's structures. The implementation of the recommendations of the present Report, together with those of the SAR, will ensure the continuation and expansion into the future of the Department's flagship position among the foreign-language Departments at UCC. Implementation of the recommendations is, in most cases, within the capacity of the Department itself. In the following cases, however, full implementation is conditional on the support of the University:

- Where members of a Department are asked to assume University responsibilities on or outside campus, both University and Department should more carefully consider the implications of these added responsibilities for the administrative support staff.
- To function more effectively, Departments need to receive appropriate budgetary information, however provisional, from central administration well in advance of the beginning of the academic year.
- Given the success to date of interdisciplinary courses, the University should now provide the framework necessary for their development and further encouragement. In particular, steps should be taken to facilitate the introduction of service language courses in other Faculties, which is now held back by the implications this has for FTEs.
- The PRG considers the staff development support available for CLTs to be grossly inadequate, and urges the University to consider defining a strategy for the provision of more development support for this category of staff.

- The University should take steps to ensure that the shortfall in the part-time staffing budget of the Department be rectified with a view to providing financial support for PhD and MA students.

## Appendix A

### Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Group Site Visit

#### Department of French

##### **Tuesday 19 March 2002**

- 18.00 – 19.30 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.  
Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.
- 20.00 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and Head of Department and representatives of Departmental Co-ordinating Committee

##### **Wednesday 20 March 2002**

- 08.30 – 09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 118, O’Rahilly Building
- 09.00 – 13.00** Consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs along with all department staff.  
Venue: Room 124, O’Rahilly Building
- 09.00 – 09.30 Professor Patrick O’Donovan, Head of Department
- 09.30 – 10.30 All staff of the Department
- 10.30 Tea/Coffee – informal gathering of all staff with PRG
- 10.45 Dr. Fiona Cox  
11.00 Dr. Maeve Conrick  
11.15 Dr. Grace Neville  
11.30 Mr. Eugene O’Sullivan  
11.45 Ms. Claire Sibut  
12.00 Dr. Angela Ryan  
12.15 Dr. Paul Hegarty  
12.30 Mr. Didier Bellettre  
12.45 Dr. Pat Crowley  
12.55 Dr. Mary Noonan  
13.15 Ms Sylvie Campion
- 13.30 – 14.30 Working lunch for members of Peer Review Group, Room 118, O’Rahilly Building
- 14.30 – 16.30 Meetings with undergraduate students by year group and postgraduate students.  
Venue: Room 124, O’Rahilly Building
- 14.30 Postgraduate Students  
15.00 Final year students  
15.30 First year students  
16.00 Second year students

- 16.30 – 17.00 Professor Peter Woodman, Dean of Faculty of Arts  
Venue: Room 118, O’Rahilly Building
- 18.30 Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day. Working dinner for members for the Peer Review Group

**Thursday 21 March 2002**

*Note: All meetings take place in Room 118, O’Rahilly Building unless otherwise indicated*

- 08.30 – 09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 118, O’Rahilly Building
- 09.00 – 09.30 Professor Brian Harvey, Vice-President for Research Policy & Support
- 09.30 – 10.30 Visit to Q+3, Boole Library. Meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services and Ms. Olivia Fitzpatrick, Subject Librarian
- 11.00 – 11.30 Professor Aine Hyland, Vice-President and member of Executive Management Group
- 11.30 – 12.00 Visits to facilities of department and others such as lecture theatres and Computer Services, including Rooms 315 and 316 O’Rahilly Building. Mr. Donal Kingston of the Computer Centre attended.
- 12.00 – 12.15 Ms. Louise Tobin, Head, Head, International Education Office
- 12.15 – 12.30 Professor Sebastian Green, Dean of Faculty of Commerce & Mr. Eoin McIntyre, Faculty of Law
- 12.30 – 13.00 Professor Patrick O’Donovan, Head of Department (to clarify any outstanding issues)
- 13.00 – 14.00 Working Lunch for members of Peer Review Group
- 14.00 – 18.00 Preparation of first draft of final report
- 18.00 – 18.30 Exit presentation, made to all staff of department by the Chair of the Peer Review Group and the other member of Peer Review Group, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group. (Note: the presentation was not for reply by the staff of the department at this point in time)  
Venue: Room 124 O’Rahilly Building
- 19.00 Working dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to complete drafting of report and finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final report.

**Friday 22 March 2002**

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