

University College Cork
National University of Ireland, Cork
Quality Improvement and Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Department of Hispanic Studies

Academic year 2000–01

Members of the Peer Review Group

Dr Ciaran Cosgrove, Department of Spanish & Portuguese, Trinity College Dublin

Professor Patrick O'Donovan, Department of French, UCC

Professor Inés Praga Terente, Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Universidad de Burgos, España

Professor Eduardo Saccone, Department of Italian, UCC

1. Timetable of the site visit

Monday 26 February

- 18.00–19.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group; briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan.
- 20.00 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, Head of Department and Departmental Co-ordinating Committee.

Tuesday 27 February

- 08.30–09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 151, Department of Hispanic Studies, O'Rahilly Building, UCC
- 09.00–13.00 Consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs along with all department staff, including administrative and support staff.
Venue for session: Room 124, O'Rahilly Building, UCC
Approximate schedule for the session:
10.00–10.30 meeting with Professor D. Mackenzie, Head of Department;
10.30–12.00 meeting with all staff;
12.00–13.00 meetings with individual members of staff
- 13.00–14.00 Working lunch in Room 151
- 14.00–14.30 Meeting with Professor Aidan Moran, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and member of the University Executive Management Group
- 14.30–14.45 Visit to core facilities of Department
- 14.45–17.00 Meetings with representative selections of students — undergraduates and postgraduates.
- 17.00–17.30 Meeting with Professor Terence O'Reilly (Director of Research)
- 17.30–18.30 Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for Wednesday 28 February
- 19.30 Working private dinner for members for the Peer Review Group

Wednesday 28 February

- 08.30–08.45 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 151, Department of Hispanic Studies, O'Rahilly Building, UCC
- 08.45–09.15 Meeting with Professor B. Harvey, Vice-President for Research Policy and Support

09.15–09.45	Meeting with Professor P. Woodman, Dean of Arts
10.00–11.00	Visits to Boole Library — Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services, and Joseph Murphy (Arts and Multimedia section)
11.00–11.30	Coffee/Tea
12.00–13.00	Meeting with members of the Department to clarify aspects of teaching and learning in the light of discussions to date and meetings with students
13.00–14.00	Working lunch
14.00–15.00	Preparation of first draft of final report
15.00–15.30	Meeting with Mr Stephen Boyd (Departmental library representative)
15.30–17.00	Preparation of draft of final report
17.00–17.30	Exit presentation
19.00	Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to complete drafting of report

The timetable for the visit was on the whole satisfactory.

2. Peer review

Methodology

Responsibility for the conduct of the review and for the preparation of the report was shared between members of the group, with responsibility for research being assigned in particular to the external members of the group. Our recommendations below are printed in bold.

Self-assessment report

The self-assessment report, which was largely prepared in accordance with the guidelines published by the Quality Promotion Unit, gave a comprehensive account of the Department's work. The Department's plans for the future development of teaching and research emerged in the course of discussions with the peer review group. The self-assessment report included the *Handbook 2000–2001* issued by the Department; for the purposes of the peer review group's report, the *Handbook* should be considered to form part of the self-assessment report. We considered the *Handbook* to be a well-written and well-presented document which serves a valuable purpose in guiding and contextualizing students' work.

3. Findings of the Peer Review Group

Department details

The report gives a clear account of the work of individual members and of the main resources on which the Department can draw. We note that the age distribution of members of staff is distributed reasonably evenly. With reference to the *Handbook*, we found the statement of the Department's aims and objectives to be comprehensive and clear-cut (see p. 4). On the evidence of the various materials we saw, our discussions with staff, and our consultations with students

(undergraduate and postgraduate), we found that the Department is working well to fulfil its aims and objectives. In particular, we found clear evidence of general satisfaction on the part of students with the Department's teaching. The objectives of the Department are highly ambitious (ranging, as they do, over the languages and cultures of the Iberian peninsula and of Latin America) and they can only be sustained on the basis of a high level of commitment on the part of members of staff.

Department organisation and planning

We noted the regularity of departmental meetings (p. 71) and the importance that the Department attaches to its annual course review (see p. 77).

We noted that in the University in general the process of change needed to be more effectively coordinated with decisions regarding budgetting and the allocation of resources: in a number of cases, we noted that academic or administrative initiatives (whether undertaken within the Department or as a result of a decision within the University) could lead to notable increases in workload and to difficulties in dealing with tasks efficiently. In our discussions with members of the Department and with University officers, we could see that the process of devolution of decision-making is under way and that real efforts are being made to facilitate the work of individuals (e.g. in research); **we concluded none the less that the process of devolution could both be made more efficient and be further clarified in its implications for academic developments.**

We noted that individual members of staff have specific areas of responsibility (see p. 71) and we found that on the whole these arrangements are effective.

We recommend that the schedule for staff–student consultation meetings be maintained at a rate of one meeting per period of teaching (see p. 75). We also noted that the students commended very favourably on the accessibility of members of staff and on the friendly and encouraging atmosphere that characterizes the Department.

Teaching and learning

We comment globally on teaching and learning below. In particular, we found that the Department is working effectively to assist students in the development of transferable skills (see *Handbook*, p. 5). We found that the arrangements for the monitoring of module content and for course review to

be effective. The arrangements for the preparation of the year abroad, and the conduct of the year abroad itself, were reported by the students with whom we consulted to be satisfactory and we concluded that the year abroad makes a highly important contribution to the education of the students who avail of it. **We recommend that the questionnaires used by the Department to canvas student opinion on teaching be expanded**, so as to allow scope for more detailed feedback and for the provision of information on more specific points in the delivery of teaching (see pp. 79 ff.). We noted that the self-assessment report contained detailed individual self-appraisals and we can see that these contain developments that could usefully be implemented (pp. 87–93).

We found that the Department made a coherent case for its participation in the B.Comm. European (or indeed any collaboration with business departments along these lines) as a rational extension of its present range of academic activities. While we acknowledge that the provision of expertise in areas of specialization needed to strengthen this degree may be costly, **we recommend that the University addresses at an early date the question of the further resources required by the Department to participate in this degree.**

We noted that the Department would wish to boost postgraduate recruitment, particularly at Ph.D. level. We found in our discussions with postgraduate students that the newly developed one-year M.A. programme was seen to be satisfactory and that the efforts to develop an effective learning environment and to maintain good completion rates (see pp. 159–66) were commendable; these should provide an effective basis for Ph.D. recruitment. We noted that the Department would wish to dedicate resources to Ph.D. recruitment in specific areas of the subject and **we recommend that, in addition to the use of its own postgraduate awards allocation for this purpose, the Department should also seek to avail of opportunities provided by the Government of Ireland Scholarships and the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions.** We noted that in the current year there is an uneven distribution of M.A. dissertation projects among members of staff and, bearing in mind that the M.A. has a quota of fifteen, **we recommend that arrangements for postgraduate supervision be kept under close review.**

Research and scholarly activity

The self-assessment report provides clear evidence of a lively research culture and we concluded that the various initiatives developed in recent years for the promotion of research provided effective encouragement for the realization of research projects (individual or collaborative). We

also found clear evidence of individual research achievement and expect that the emphasis placed on research in the Department will lead to continued and perhaps enhanced research productivity. We noted that the Centre for Mexican Studies plays an important role in the Department's research and cultural promotion and that the Department envisages collaborating in the development of other research centres on an interdisciplinary basis.

Staff development

We noted the work done in this area and the importance that is placed on research for the development of the discipline and of the Department.

External relations

The commitment of the Department to maintain active working relations with academic and cultural agencies in the hispanophone and lusophone world is commendable and it strongly favours undergraduate education (e.g. through the funding of language teaching posts). We noted the important work the Department does in promoting an interest in hispanophone and lusophone culture.

Support services

The Department comments on the whole favourably on the role of support services (see p. 184). **In the course of our discussions with members of staff, we concluded that specific support initiatives (e.g. Syllable Plus) might have benefited from greater coordination and, above all, from more detailed advanced planning. We found that online access on the part of the Department to the student records database (via ITS) could be considerably improved.** While members of the Department commented favourably on the co-operative and helpful disposition of the range of support services in the University, **we found that more could be done to anticipate the support needs of academic departments**, particularly in cases where department are called upon to participate in substantial administrative projects. We noted also that the **cleaning of the O'Rahilly Building (first floor) could be considerably improved.**

We noted that, while **the Library** adequately met the needs of undergraduate teaching, it **stood in need of development as a research resource** (we noted also that the University has identified this need as a strategic priority). We noted that the Department will in the near future proceed to make

recommendations for renewal of reference holdings in Spanish in the Library and **we recommend that representatives of the Department and the Library meet so as to identify ways in which teaching and learning could be more effectively supported** (e.g. with reference to continuing security problems and loss of materials, the ratio of seating spaces to shelving, and the role of the Library in developing more effective collection development policies (we noted that by comparison to other academic and research libraries this role could be considerably strengthened)).

Departmental co-ordinating committee and methodology employed in the preparation of the self-assessment report

We have no comments to make on this point.

4. Overall analysis

The Department of Hispanic Studies engages in teaching and research in a number of major languages and cultures; this work is clearly indispensable to the university of today and the Department has good foundations on which to develop this central role. We found that the Department's mission and role were clearly understood and supported by officers of the University.

We noted that the Department had in recent years extensively revised its undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum (see p. 1) and that the first cohort to follow the undergraduate programme has yet to graduate. We noted none the less that the organization of teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level was well regarded by the students with whom we consulted. What characterizes the programme most visibly is an impressive commitment to the linguistic and cultural plurality of the Iberian peninsula and of Latin America. At the same time, the Department maintains a robust commitment to canonical features of medieval and early modern Hispanic culture. In brief, the Department's commitment to Hispanic studies in their totality is commendable. We discussed the recent curricular changes at length and concluded that they represented a considered programme of development and that they were in various ways favourable to the integration of teaching and research (e.g. through the provision of small-group teaching and the development of specialized modules in the final undergraduate year). **We recommend that the Department fixes a date for the review of the undergraduate programme in the light of completed student cycles. We recommend also that language teaching should be kept under review. We concluded that the role of the Language Centre in supporting the teaching of the Department would be**

considerably enhanced by means of greater opportunities for staff development on the part of College Language Teachers and greatly improved access to information technology facilities.