

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK
National University of Ireland, Cork

Quality Improvement / Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Department of Early and Medieval Irish

Academic Year 2003/04

10th March 2004

MEMBERS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP:

Professor Áine Hyland, Professor of Education and Vice-President, UCC (Chair)

Professor Éamonn Ó Carragáin, Professor of English, UCC

Professor Fergus Kelly, Director of the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute of
Advanced Studies, Ireland

Professor Thomas Charles-Edwards, Jesus Professor of Celtic, University of Oxford, UK

Timetable

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

PEER REVIEW

Methodology:

The externs assessed the department's research and teaching. Áine Hyland (chair) concentrated on the department's administration and staff development. Eamonn Ó Carragáin acted as rapporteur, and concentrated on Library provision, and the standing of the department within the Faculty of Arts and hence within the University. All four members of the group cooperated in drafting the present report.

Site Visit:

In the O'Rahilly building, the group visited all rooms assigned to the department. It was very impressed by the efficient use of the limited space available, but was strongly of the opinion that the space made available to the department was inadequate for its needs: in particular for its postgraduates and for its research projects such as 'Locus'. The College should assign extra space to the department as a matter of priority. The group also visited the library, Q+3 and Q-1, and examined the holdings in Early and Medieval Irish and cognate areas, in consultation with the relevant subject librarians.

Overall analysis

The self-assessment report presented to the review group by the department:

The reviewers found the self-assessment report very readable and coherent. It was realistic, and self-critical where appropriate, and successfully identified all the major strengths of the department and the threats to its further development. The reviewers considered that this impressive report was most helpful, and gave the reviewers an excellent starting-point for their work.

Strengths of the department:

The reviewers agree with the self-assessment report that there is excellent communication among staff, and that there is 'an ethos of teamwork, efficient use of resources, and valuing individual skills'. The reviewers felt that the harmonious relations within the department had equally benefited the department's research and its teaching.

The reviewers were particularly impressed by the close and creative cooperation between the Department of Early and Medieval Irish and the Department of Modern Irish. This cooperation is enhanced by the joint participation of staff of both Departments in the organisation of the annual Irish Texts Society Seminar, and by the welcome occasional participation from the Modern Irish Department in the Department of Early & Medieval Irish weekly staff-postgraduate seminar.

The students whom the review-group met, both undergraduate and postgraduate, were unanimous and unstinting in their praise for the staff's attitude to students. They repeatedly testified to the staff's generosity with their time, expertise, and even with their own personal libraries.

The reviewers, and in particular the external reviewers, are agreed that the department has an outstanding reputation, both within the National University of Ireland and internationally. This was fully confirmed by the range and quality of the universities from which the post-graduates came. These included highly prestigious universities in the USA, Europe and Great Britain, including universities which are themselves centres of excellence in Early and Medieval Irish. The reviewers consider that a department that can so ably attract

postgraduates from overseas is a most valuable resource in which it would be wise for the University to invest.

The reviewers were impressed by the success of the Department in attracting research money. The Locus project was originally funded through PRTL11 and is currently funded under Scheme 4 (Projects) of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). A number of research post-graduate students in the Department are funded under the Schemes 1 and 2 of the IRCHSS (post-graduate and doctoral students) and others are funded from various sources including Finnish and U.K. sources. The reviewers were also impressed at the success of the Department in attracting funding through its involvement in the Early Start programme and through JYA students. The continuing ability of the Department to generate income through initiatives of this kind will strengthen the viability of the Department in future years as the university's dependency on government funding will perforce be reduced.

Taking account of the stage they have each reached in their academic development, all members of the Department, both junior and senior, have excellent research records. The senior members of the department have an enviable record in major research and have published innovative works of the highest scholarly standard. The reviewers were glad that the retired Professor continues to play an active part in the research agenda of the department, particularly through his continued leadership of the 'Locus' project.

Weaknesses:

The reviewers noted that, in spite of their remarkable achievements, the members of the department felt that there was a 'difficulty in making their voice heard' within UCC. The reviewers were of the view that this, rightly understood, was a sign of strength rather than weakness: the department is evidently fully and creatively engaged in excellent teaching and in the development of the subject. It is evident that the students from other departments, such as History, who come looking for instruction in Early and Medieval Irish, get an excellent reception and outstanding teaching. The reviewers hope that, partially as a result of the present review, the College will make efforts to demonstrate to the department that their feeling, that it is difficult to make their voice heard, will be shown to be unfounded. The reviewers were unanimous in the view that the department is an outstanding centre of excellence, both in research and in teaching, within the Arts Faculty, and that the successful

consolidation and development of the subject is, and should continue to be, central to the development of the Humanities in the College.

In the self-assessment report, reference is made to the difficulty in a small department of facilitating staff for extended study / sabbatical leave. The reviewers were sympathetic to this issue and agree that staff should be facilitated in every way possible to avail of sabbatical leave. It is understood that one member of staff has applied this year for an IRCHSS Senior Fellowship. These fellowships provide funding of up to €38,000 to the university to provide cover for a member of staff absent for up to a year.

While there is a large First Year intake into Celtic Civilization, the numbers of students taking the subject in Second and Third years is relatively low. The reviewers recommend that the department should consider seeking recognition for Celtic Civilisation from the Registration Council for Secondary Teachers. Such a development might increase the numbers taking the subject to B.A. level.

Threats facing the department:

The staffing complement of the Department consists of four staff. At present the Chair of Early and Medieval Irish is vacant, following the retirement last year of the holder of the Chair of the Department. A temporary contract lecturer, initially appointed to the Department to cover teaching requirements in advance of the retirement of the professor, currently holds the fourth post. The other three posts are filled by an Associate Professor, a Senior Lecturer and a College Lecturer. The reviewers concurred with the view of the Department that its staffing should be maintained at pre-2003 levels, that is, with the vacancy in the chair filled, and with three other full-time appointments. The reviewers considered that the chair should be filled as a matter of urgency in order to ensure that the Department of Early and Medieval Irish continue as a centre of excellence in UCC.

Opportunities:

If the university assigns to the department the resources which it needs (centred on a Chair), then the reviewers consider that the department is likely to be pivotal to any future development of Irish Studies within the University. Granted the necessary resources, one possible innovation for the department might be to collaborate, in the context of the School of Languages, with the Departments of Modern Irish, Classics, French and English to develop a

unified course in Medieval and Modern Irish Literatures. Any such future development should not interfere with the coherence and academic standards (in particular the linguistic standards) of the successful existing Diploma in Irish Studies.

Benchmarking:

The External Reviewers agree with the Self-Assessment Report in its claim that ‘the Department offers a broader spectrum of instruction in Celtic Civilisation than any other undergraduate programme in existence’ (p. 38). They very much hope that the Department may be able to extend the teaching of Medieval Welsh (already provided for graduates), and in this way reinforce the broadly Celtic, as opposed to simply Irish, provision which the department offers. The externals felt it to be regrettable that, in the course of the last generation, less Irish has been taught in Wales and less Welsh has been taught in Ireland, and that the two cultures have thus started to drift apart academically. The Reviewers recommend that the UCC Authorities help and encourage the Department of Early and Medieval Irish, under the auspices of the East-West dimension of the Anglo-Irish agreement, to reinstate the Celtic Studies network which worked well in the 1980s (Self-Assessment Report, p. 31). If, for example, a postgraduate student of Welsh could spend a year at Cork to help in the teaching of Welsh, and vice versa, then Irish would be strengthened in Wales and Welsh in Ireland. In this regard, the Reviewers draw attention to the existing links with Rennes and other universities (p. 31), and the annual Harting scholarship which has enabled Dutch to be regularly offered at UCC.

Findings of the Peer-Review Group

Departmental organisation and Planning:

The Review Group was highly impressed by the close collaboration between Early and Medieval Irish and Modern Irish, in a situation where both departments retained their separate identities. This collaboration was evident in the sharing of secretarial and postgraduate facilities, and in joint seminars. The group recommends that the separate identity of the Department of Early and Medieval Irish should continue to be recognized, and sees the early filling of the chair as essential to this end. The review group was conscious that, in some administrative areas of the university, the separate identities of these two departments was not at present fully recognized: indeed, some areas of the College administration seem to be under the misapprehension that there is one single Department of

Irish. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that, in recent years, the Finance Office has allocated a single budget code to both departments. In order to ensure that this confusion will cease, the review group recommends that separate budgets, under two separate budget codes, be allocated to the Department of Early and Medieval Irish and to the Department of Modern Irish. In the course of the Peer Review, the Heads of both departments, the Dean of Arts and the Registrar agreed with this recommendation; and the representative of the Finance Office agreed that, if the Department of Early and Medieval Irish and the Department of Modern Irish both requested it, there would be no difficulty in implementing the recommendation.

Teaching and Learning:

The review group recognizes and appreciates the substantial teaching load carried by every member of the department. The group recognizes that tutorial support has to be limited by the resources and staffing available to the department. Nevertheless, the group considers that, particularly in First Arts, it is important to move away from the more passive forms of learning associated with the traditional lecture format, and to encourage a more active engagement in learning through discussion, writing and debate. The department might consider consolidating and strengthening their existing tutorial system by building the tutorials into the assessment system, and in particular by assigning marks to students' attendance and contribution at tutorials. As the number of senior staff is so limited, postgraduate and postdoctoral students, including Government of Ireland scholarship holders after their first year, might be considered for such teaching. The review-group considered that such teaching experience would be valuable for the high-quality postgraduates attracted by the department.

Length of Christmas Vacation:

The Review Committee noted with sympathy the statement (p. 36) that the Christmas vacation is 'inadequate', particularly in view of the essay marking and correcting needing to be done during it (see p. 18). It recommends that the College Authorities give consideration to lengthening the Christmas Vacation to three weeks. The issue of introducing a reading week in the middle of each of the twelve-week semesters was raised by some of the reviewers. Such a **reading week** has apparently already been introduced in a number of departments. This possibility might be discussed at the level of the Faculty of Arts, but if such a development occurs, it would be important to ensure that the overall student

experience be maintained at its current high level and that no dilution occur in the course quality or in the length of the teaching year.

Library support:

The reviewers noted with satisfaction that the library provision for Celtic Studies in general, and Old and Middle Irish in particular, is good. On their visit to the Library the Reviewers were impressed by the good relations which the Department has built up with the relevant Subject Librarians and with Special Collections, to which the Department has on occasion contributed generously from Departmental allocations. There are however gaps in Welsh which might quite easily and cheaply be remedied. There are also major gaps in the European patristic, literary and historical source material needed to place Old and Middle Irish writings in a European cultural context. The reviewers recommend that the Department establish close working relations with the administrators of the PRTLTI grant for 'Transmissions and Transformations of the Ancient World', in order to help fill some of these gaps.

Research and Scholarly Activity:

The Review Group wish to commend the success of the department in attracting funding from a diverse range of sources, both within and outside the country.

The Review Group is strongly of the opinion that regular study leave is vital to the continued research success of the department. It therefore fully agrees with the Department that it should gain a post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow, so as to release full-time members of the department for regular Study Leave. This Fellowship might be funded from increased revenue from, and increased departmental sharing of, JYA funds. The Department should be given an increased proportion of the fees paid by overseas students. An appropriate portion of the Summer School and Early Start fees should be assigned to the department.

Final conclusions:

The department has created, with very limited resources, a very enviable record both in teaching and in research. The University should proceed as soon as possible to filling the chair of Early and Medieval Irish, and should realise that a well-resourced Department of Early and Medieval Irish is central to the future development of Irish Studies within the University.

Appendix A

Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit

Roinn na Sean-Ghaeilge

Sunday 11th January 2004

- 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.
Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.
- 20.00 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and members of Department:

Monday 12th January 2004

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group
Consideration of Self-Assessment Report
- 09.00 Professor Máire Herbert, Head of Department
- 09.30 All staff of Department
Meetings with individual members of staff
- 11.00 Dr. Cairtriona Ó Dochartaigh
11.20 Dr Kevin Murray
11.40 Dr. John Carey
12.00 Ms. Siobhán Ní Dhonghaile
12.20 Ms. Maude Vernon
- 14.00 Visit to core facilities of Department, escorted by Professor Máire Herbert
- 14.30 Representatives of undergraduate students
- First Year
Ciará Hennessy
Keelin Smyth, Tom Curtin (mature)
- Second Year
Jerry Kelleher (mature)
John Weldon (mature)
- Third Year
Máiréad Mooney
Susan O'Connell
- Visiting Student(s)
Steven O'Neill (VSUS)
Caroline Bozec (VSEU)

Evening Student(s)
Paul Tassie (4th year)

15.30 Representatives of postgraduate students

Amy Morel-Berthier
Andrea Jones
Eleanor Neff
Harriet Thomsett
Katja Ritari
Phillip Bernhardt-House
Simon Lambrecht

16.00 Researchers

Dr. Diarmuid Ó Murchadha
Dr. Donna Thornton
Dr. Clodagh Ní Dhubhnaigh
Ms. Emma Nic Cárthaigh

17.00 Meetings with representative selections of recent graduates, employers and other stakeholders

Professor Emeritus Pádraig Ó Riain
Billy Williams
Brian Ó Donnchadha
Diarmuid Scully
Máire Ní Dhuigneain
Maria Elena O'Brien
Mary Steele
Michael O'Callaghan
Shane Lehane

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

Tuesday 13th January 2004

08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group

09.00 Professor Aidan Moran, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs,

09.30 Professor Seán Ó Coileáin, Dean of Faculty of Celtic Studies

10.00 Visit to Q+3, Boole Library, meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services and Ms. Olivia Fitzpatrick, Subject Librarian,

11.30 Ms. Carmel Cotter, Finance Office

12.00 Professor Kevin Collins, Vice-President for Research Policy & Support

12.30 Professor Máire Herbert, Head of Department

- 14.00 Professor David Cox, Dean of Faculty of Arts
- 14.30 Preparation of first draft of final report
- 17.00 Exit presentation made to all staff of the Department by the international member 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 finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final report.

Wednesday 14th January 2004

Externs depart