

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

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**Department of Economics**

**Academic Year 2000/2001**

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

<u>Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
1. Mr. John FitzGerald	University Librarian, University College Cork	Internal PRG Member (Chairman)
2. Prof. Stephen Fahy	Dept. Physics, UCC University College Cork	Internal PRG Member
3. Prof. Frank Stephen	Dept. Economics, University of Strathclyde	External PRG member
4. Prof. Alan Matthews	Dept. Economics, Trinity College Dublin	External PRG Member

## **Timetable for the site visit:**

### **Wednesday 28 February**

- 18.00 – 19.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group in Suite 2, Business Centre, Kingsley Hotel, Victoria Cross, Cork  
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, Head of Department and Departmental Co-ordinating Committee in Proby's Bistro.

### **Thursday 1 March**

- 08.30 – 09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 101, Department of Economics, Aras na Laoi, UCC
- 09.00 – 13.00 Consideration of Self-Assessment Report and other inputs along with all department staff including administrative staff. Time allowed for private meetings of members of the Peer Review Group with members of staff.  
Approximate schedule for the session:  
09.00 – 09.30 Professor Connell Fanning, Head of Department  
09.30 – 12.00 members of staff as a group  
12.00 – 13.00 individual members of staff  
Venue for this session: New Board Room, Hayfield Manor  
Coffee/tea provided during the session.

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- 13.00 – 14.00 Working lunch in Room 101, Department of Economics, Aras na Laoi  
 14.00 – 14.30 Visit to core facilities of Department  
 14.30 – 17.00 Meetings with representative selections of students.  
 Coffee/tea provided during session  
 17.30 – 18.30 Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified  
 and to finalise tasks for following day  
 19.30 Working private dinner in Suite 2, Business Centre, Kingsley Hotel for  
 members of the Peer Review Group

### **Friday 2 March**

- 08.30 – 09.00 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 101, Department of Economics,  
 Aras na Laoi, UCC  
 09.00 – 09.30 Meeting with Registrar/Vice-President for Academic Affairs, Professor  
 Aidan Moran  
 09.30 – 10.30 Visit to Boole Library: Q + 1, Margot Conrick, Head of Information  
 Services, Niall McSweeney, Subject Librarian,  
 10.30 – 11.00 Visit to facilities such as lecture theatres and Computer Services  
 11.00 – 11.30 Coffee/Tea  
 11.30 – 12.00 Meeting with Professor Brian Harvey, Vice-President for Research Policy  
 & Support  
 13.00 – 14.00 Working Lunch  
 14.00 – 17.00 Preparation of first draft of final report  
 Coffee/tea provided during the session.  
 17.00 – 17.30 Exit presentation, made by Prof. Alan Matthews, summarising the principal  
 findings of the Peer Review Group  
 Venue for session: Room 201, Department of Economics, Aras na Laoi  
 19.00 Working private dinner in Suite 2, Business Centre, Kingsley Hotel for  
 members of the Peer Review Group, to complete drafting of report and  
 finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final  
 report.

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### **Saturday 3 March**

Externs depart

### **Tuesday 20 March**

Meeting of John FitzGerald and Stephen Fahy with Prof S. Green, Dean of  
 Commerce.<sup>1</sup>

### **Comments on the Availability of Information to the Peer Review Group**

- It would have been useful to have been supplied with detailed information in the  
 following areas: finance, student numbers, staff-student ratios, student progression.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Green was not available to meet with the full Peer Review Group during the visit of externals

### **Comments on the Format of the Process**

- It could be useful for the Quality Promotion Office to advise and assist participating departments in determining the format and content of the Self Assessment Report, particularly in relation to the statistical information which could be provided.
- The Library document should be directed to the Department and not just to the reviewers.
- If the University has particular objectives in its strategic plan, these should be reflected in the guidelines for assessment.
- A meeting with relevant Dean during the visit of the external reviewers is essential.
- It would have been useful to have had 90 minutes allocated at the start of the visit to a meeting with the Departmental 'Co-ordinating' Committee to deal with issues of fact and information.
- The facilities and accommodation available to this group were of a very high standard.

### **Peer Review**

#### **Methodology:**

The report was drafted jointly by all members of the group. The external PRG members took the lead in the more specialised aspects of the activities reviewed.

The report was drafted during the review and revised using confidential e-mail communication. The revision process was coordinated by the Chairman.

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

| The review group was aware of issues of dispute within the department but understood that its remit did not extend to consideration of these issues.

| The group noted that 24 staff questionnaires were returned and that a similar number of personal profiles were submitted. This represents a response rate of 70% for academic staff.

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The review group commends the department for the comprehensive and professionally produced documentation provided for review, and for the open manner in which it responded to requests for information on, and clarification of, programmes and activities.

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

The following report commences with an overall analysis of the department. Recommendations for improvement are made throughout the report. These supplement the recommendations made by the department in the Self-Assessment Report.

#### **General Comments**

1. The Department has experienced considerable growth in student and staff numbers in recent years. It has developed a successful portfolio of courses, encouraged a significant number of younger staff through PhD programmes and started to expand its research activity. This progress is due mainly to the planned strategic approach which has been taken in the development of key aspects of the Department. The Department is currently at a point where strategic priorities could usefully be re-assessed.
2. Like all organisations, the Department has limited resources, and should prioritise its future activities in line with its strategy. In particular, the balance in allocating staff time between undergraduate teaching and administration, on the one hand, and time for research and professional development, on the other hand, should be continually kept under review. If research is to be pursued as a priority, the relevant resources could be reorganised in such a way as to support this objective.

### Teaching and Learning

3. The Department has a very strong focus on undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. It estimates that it is involved in 35 separate degree programmes (of which 22 are undergraduate degree programmes) and that between 2,300 (SAR p. 3) and 2,600 (SAR p. 20) students take at least one Economics course in each academic year
4. There is strong evidence of innovation in the delivery of the curriculum, including excellent teaching methods, well-structured courses and well organised support activities. The student body appears positive and well disposed.
5. The Department philosophy is that its undergraduate courses should be individually tailored to each group of students. While there are educational arguments for this, it does lead to a duplication of basic principles and methods courses. Consideration might be given to the benefits and costs of consolidating the teaching of similar courses where it does not lead to excessive student numbers in a class as against alternative uses of staff time and effort, for example in upgrading the quality of undergraduate teaching (for example, by providing final year tutorials or additional elective courses) or in research activity. Deleted: considerable
6. The Department is highly sensitive to the need to link its teaching activities to developments in the profession and to the needs of the employment market. However, there are also good administrative and pedagogical reasons for allowing programmes to remain unchanged for a reasonable period of time. Given the significant innovation which has taken place in recent years, the Department should now consider allowing courses to run with minimal adjustment for an appropriate term. The Review Group noted the new development in the BSc (Finance) course whereby Year 3 would be an intern year spent in a placement within a firm. While there will be undoubted benefits to the participating students from this development, the group noted that the arrangements for securing these placements were not yet in place and that it could, potentially, require a very significant input of staff time for the 60 students involved. Deleted: .

It is also desirable that, within the constraints of staff leaves of absence and turnover, there is continuity of staff teaching assignments to individual courses.

7. The group noted that a limited number of electives is available in some programmes. In the BComm degree, this is because students do not specialise in Economics until the final year. The Department has introduced the streaming of electives in the final year of the BA course. It is not clear that there are educational arguments for restricting student choice at this level and it was unpopular with the student representatives to whom we spoke.<sup>2</sup> There also appeared to be a need to ensure that students were better informed in first year of the implications of their choices of electives in second year on their course options in further years (possibly using a standard flow diagram indicating course dependencies).
8. There could be greater exploration and analysis of how individual courses relate to each other, across a programme.<sup>3</sup> This could be reviewed in conjunction with a review of progression through degree courses to ensure that material is appropriate to the year/level.
9. In the area of examinations, the Department is to be commended for developing an exemplary set of internal Examinations Guidelines. It might be worthwhile to consider allowing greater flexibility in accommodating the combining of examination formats. The high failure rate in 99/00 Arts should be analysed in the context of the distribution of all related marks.
10. The Department has a limited programme of international exchanges.<sup>4</sup> The group recognises that it can be difficult to persuade students of the advantages of study abroad if it means lengthening their programme of study, but it also appeared that students were not well informed about exchange possibilities. It noted that the Department was putting additional efforts into promoting exchanges and monitoring the performance of its students abroad and commends these efforts.
11. The Department's internal teaching and learning quality assurance procedures are very good. Student feedback should continue and should be collected and analysed in a more systematic manner. Course review could be made more effective if coordinated among the relevant committees in a systematic way. The Self-Assessment Report recognises the need to develop a framework for evaluating effectiveness and coherence of student programmes. As identified in the Self-Assessment Report, there is a need for a short annual report to be produced on each class/programme, based on student feedback and performance.

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<sup>2</sup> The marketing objectives of profiling the advantages of the BA degree with Economics as a major option can still be achieved by pointing out that students can select courses with a particular specialism or orientation without requiring that this be done.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Joint Honours students in the BA programme who take EC2107 in Year 2 would appear to be disadvantaged in taking one of the two compulsory quantitative methods courses in Year 3.

<sup>4</sup> The Department has exchanges in place to cater for 4 student flows annually (SAR p. 93), but in oral evidence it appears that up to 9 students participate in exchanges primarily administered by the Department.

12. It is noted that extra curricular activities fulfil important social role for students. The Department is to be commended for strengthening links with the student body through close staff-student contact and support. There may be an opportunity to harness this by developing a more academic base to student society activities. The Department could consider taking a stronger role in encouraging students to organise debates, publications, dialogue with visiting experts, etc.

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13. There is a need to maintain close links with the Library and to build up a relationship with the new Subject Librarian for Business and Economics.

14. There is a serious lack of open-access computers for students of Economics at UCC. Those machines which are available are low-grade and many appear to be incapable of running the appropriate software for students of Economics. This is further heightened by the apparently very generous provision for students of the Business Information Systems courses. There is also an urgent need to improve provision for computer practicals. The Review Group understood the Department's wish for dedicated facilities for its undergraduate students in the light of the inadequate College-wide provision but felt that, in principle, this was not a desirable course to pursue. It noted that the University plans to improve IT facilities for undergraduates across campus. In the meantime, it recommends that agreement should be sought to provide access for at least some of the Economics degree programmes to the BIS facilities which appear to be underused.

15. The Department attracts a healthy number of taught postgraduate students and students appear to be satisfied with their education. Students on the MA/MEconSc undertake a minor dissertation and are encouraged and willing to publish their work where appropriate. Project-based activities appear to be well structured and supervised, particularly in the MBS.

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16. The H.Dip (Economics) has an impressive history. One of its stated objectives is to provide additional qualifications for entry into Master's programmes. It would now be useful to review the desirability of continuing to offer this programme, if the staff time involved might be used more productively elsewhere. This is in the context of strong current interest in the successful Masters degree programmes and the fact that only 5 out of 21 students on the 1999 intake used this route to enter a Master's programme.

17. There is a clear need for improved postgraduate facilities. The current Postgraduate Laboratory is wholly inadequate for current needs. Upgrading the postgraduate student computing facilities should be an urgent priority. This will be particularly important if the Department is to succeed in increasing its postgraduate research student numbers in the future.

## Research

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18. The Department is successfully growing its research activities over the last decade and has established a research culture through the institution of seminars, newsletters,

regular publication, etc. The Department has chosen to cluster its research efforts around three broadly-defined areas and this makes sense for a department of its size. The Staff Development Programme has been successful in developing indigenous research strengths and skills. The possibility of extending the programme in the form of a 'Continuing Staff Development Programme' should now be considered.

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19. This would focus on enabling staff to continue to pursue research in their chosen fields and to formally set out their own research agendas in the context of personal research plans. A key objective for staff interested in developing research interests must be to free up time to engage in research. Staff themselves could take greater advantage of the research support opportunities available in the University and elsewhere (sabbatical leave, grants, awards, etc.). Greater use should be made of sabbatical leave in other institutions as part of an explicit programme of developing staff contacts and networks.
20. There is also a need to explore ways of increasing research funding into the Department. This will be particularly important if the Department's objective of increasing the number of postgraduate research students is to be met as good students will only be attracted from either Ireland or abroad if funding is available. There are now exciting opportunities for research support in the social sciences following recent government and HEA initiatives. The support of the Research Support Office should be sought, particularly by junior staff, to assist in achieving greater success in the research funding arena. This would allow the University to better match funding opportunities with the Department's research priorities. Some of these research funding opportunities will require inter-disciplinary collaboration, and the Department could explore how best it could contribute to, and benefit from, the Faculty of Commerce proposal for a postgraduate School of Business Studies and Government.

### **Departmental Organisation**

21. The Department has developed an effective and unique administrative structure by successfully integrating administrative responsibilities with academic roles and by recruiting and retaining an extremely committed and dedicated administrative team.
22. Delegation of administrative functions to academic staff engenders a good understanding of academic management objectives within a large and complex department. Efforts should be made to keep procedures simple and to ensure that academic staff remain focused on devoting resources to stated academic and research priorities.
23. The academic management system which has been adopted places a premium on regular communication among all members of the Department. Care should be taken to ensure that staff are informed of activities and decisions in the various areas of responsibilities. Relevant staff could meet together regularly to exchange reports, provide feedback, and stimulate discussion in the various areas of responsibility.

Committee Chairs should report to regular staff meetings where their decisions are explained and discussed.

24. The high skill-levels of administrative staff in the Department need to be recognised by the University.

### **Staffing**

25. The existence of three senior vacant posts in the UCC Calendar is noted (two Statutory Lecturers and one Associate Professor). ~~The Department is encouraged to make a renewed effort to fill these posts as a means of attracting senior staff who could contribute to building up research capacity in line with the Department's research strategy.~~

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26. The Department's Induction Programme for teaching assistants functions extremely well and ensures that this group can contribute effectively to the delivery and development of courses.

27. There is a clear need for a University-wide staff induction programme for both academic and administrative staff. It is noted that the University has begun to plan for such a programme.

*END OF REPORT*