

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

**QUALITY IMPROVEMENT/QUALITY ASSURANCE**

**PEER REVIEW GROUP REPORT**

***SCHOOL OF THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT***

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**ACADEMIC YEAR 2013-14**

**Date January 2014**

## PEER REVIEW GROUP MEMBERS

Name	Affiliation	Role
1. Professor Harry Fokkens	University of Leiden	Department of Archaeology
2. Professor Irene Lynch-Fannon	Faculty of Law, UCC	Member of QPC
3. Mr Gavin Lynch-Frahill	Students' Union	Student Representative
4. Professor Henk Ottens	EUGEO	President
5. Professor John Sweeney	NUI Maynooth	Department of Geography

## TIMETABLE OF THE SITE VISIT

- The timetable for the site visit is attached as Appendix 1.
- The Peer Review Group was of the opinion that, whilst the timetable allowed them to have valuable meetings with a wide range of staff and students, the schedule was extremely intensive, especially with regard to having three consecutive meetings with large student groups. For future reference it might be considered useful to build in some more time slots for opportunities for the group to reflect on what it had heard. The Peer Review Group agreed that having a meeting with the Head of College towards the end of the site visit was a good idea as it allowed for a more focused set of questions than would have been possible earlier in the procedure.

## PEER REVIEW

- **Methodology**  
The Peer Review Group agreed an initial allocation of topics for the preliminary drafting of sections of the report; this was followed by a full Panel exploration of all matters. Group discussion led to joint agreement on conclusions.
- **Site Visit**  
The Peer Review Group considered that the site visit was very well organised with good support from both the School and its staff and the Quality Promotion Unit. It wishes to thank all those involved for their input and time. Good documentation was delivered in advance of the site visit. The Peer Review Group suggests that the initial meeting with all School staff might have been better organised as a less formal meeting to enable the group to take informal soundings on an individual basis. It also wondered why no students were present at the exit presentation.
- **Peer Review Group Report**  
Each member of the Peer Review Group took responsibility for one or more sections of the report. All text was shared between all members. The Panel worked together to provide a draft of the report on the final day of the review visit. This draft was then further refined by the Panel remotely before being finalised and agreed by the Peer Review Group.

## OVERALL ANALYSIS

- Self-Assessment Report

The Peer Review Group was provided with five different volumes of self-assessment, one relating to the School of the Human Environment and two relating to each of the individual component departments. It acknowledges the enormous amount of effort that was invested in compiling and collecting the information for these comprehensive reports. However, although these reports provided much information, they were also very difficult to work with because they were each structured quite differently and it was not easy to rapidly derive relevant key management information. The Peer Review Group therefore recommends that for future evaluations the School uses a harmonised approach to the provision of more easily comprehensible diagrams and tables. Short introductions and conclusions to separate appendices might also be helpful. For the external evaluators, it was, for instance, impossible to comprehend the basis of the UCC accounting system for calculation of FTEs. Since this underpins funding, it is crucial that assessors can understand the system. This may be a task to be undertaken at university level to improve transparency of budget allocations. The Peer Review Group would suggest that much of the information on teaching modules could be provided on CD-ROM or simply as a series of hyperlinks since most of it was a paper version of the book of modules and the website. Some material (e.g. External Examiners' comments on individual students) is considered not appropriate for inclusion in such a document.

It was difficult to derive key financial and management information from the documents. The Peer Review Group would recommend that such information be provided in any future review. For example the Group received very useful information from the Office of the VP for Research and Innovation and from the Finance Office. This information is readily available and would have been useful to receive in advance. Financial information could be provided through the QPU from the Finance Office or indeed directly from the Finance Office on a confidential basis to the Peer Review Group.

The School of the Human Environment report described the history of the School, its present state and initiatives for cooperation, with some general conclusions. A more rigorous self-assessment with a SWOT analysis was not really produced.

The Peer Review Group found it difficult to determine in the Archaeology Self-Assessment Report which statements referred to the past and which were current. For example, the space/accommodation strategy is not current and does not provide details for looking forward. The Geography Self-Assessment Report was more helpful in this regard.

- SWOT Analysis

As mentioned above, there was no Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats analysis for the School as a whole. The SWOT analysis in Archaeology took place over one day. In Geography the SWOT analysis process was initialised in January 2013 for

academic staff and comments on a draft document requested at the May 2013 staff meeting. It is not clear what procedures were put in place for non-academic staff or when final sign off occurred.

However, generally, the SWOT analyses were carried out professionally and provided a good snapshot of the opportunities and challenges facing both departments.

- **Benchmarking**

The Department of Geography was benchmarked against the School of Archaeology and Geography, NUI Galway and against the School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow. The Department of Archaeology was benchmarked against the equivalent department at the University of Oslo. In both cases these were good choices. NUIG is undergoing the same transition phase in terms of identity and future strategic challenges and the review panel felt that this was a useful and appropriate exercise.

### ***Departmental/School co-ordinating committee and methodology employed in the preparation of the Self-Assessment Report***

The methodology seemed in places to be an assessment of what has been achieved since the last review and there was less emphasis than would be desired on future strategic direction and policy. As mentioned above, the Peer Review Group would have found it useful to have a uniformity of approach and structure for the submitted documents.

## **FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP**

### ***Governance and the Structure of the School***

The approach taken to the provision of documentation for the Review underlined the fact that the 'schoolification' of the Departments was not yet embedded in the management or governance structures of the individual disciplinary groups and was certainly not embedded in the 'hearts and minds' of the academic or administrative staff of either discipline.

In terms of governance, both Departments relied heavily on traditional departmental structures and there was not a real sense of any fora for participation at School or College level for most staff. Heads had individual meetings with College staff; participation at College level seemed limited to the Head of School at College Executive Management Committee level with a consequent disconnect of information becoming apparent. There was little evidence of any real engagement with established university structures from School to College level.

On the other hand, there was considerable evidence of engagement across the University with disciplines, Schools and even Colleges, depending on the disciplinary and research interests of individual staff.

### **Recommendations:**

The School structure could be strengthened in the following ways without compromising the disciplinary identities as described, and without making any strong recommendations regarding interdisciplinary research. The Peer Review Group recommends that:

- That the School structure be exploited better to ensure participation for all staff in the decision-making processes of the College and University.
- That the full potential of the School be more intensively explored for the two disciplines in relation to strategic matters, such as resourcing in the broadest sense, internationalisation, innovative academic development, particularly in the areas of future research and where the disciplines meet, for example, in the fields of geomorphology, GIS, landscape and historical geography.
- That the School be utilised in relation to supporting creative and innovative teaching (e.g. the blended learning field module initiative of Geography), the teaching of academic transferable skills on both undergraduate and graduate levels, grant writing for research students and geo-information skills at undergraduate levels.

### ***Department/School Organisation & Planning***

The staffing complement of both Departments was helpfully provided in a diagram in the document on the School of the Human Environment. Both departments are clearly well-organised in terms of the delivery of courses and the quality of the curriculum involved. The Review Group felt that the ability of the School to maximise its organisational potential was limited by the non-replacement of key personnel.

#### **Recommendation:**

- That a medium-term planning cycle for staff deployment be introduced to facilitate research leave, up-skilling, and professional development, especially of younger staff members.

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

#### *School*

Both departments provide a curriculum that covers the main areas in their disciplines and both undergraduate and post graduate students are supplied with an extensive portfolio of appropriate modules. Staff are to be complimented for their willingness to teach across a broad range of topics.

Students in both Departments emphasised the importance of ‘learning by doing’ and felt that practical individual project work was highly beneficial. Interpretative reading skills and data analysis were particularly mentioned as areas which might be stressed to a greater extent in both Departments. The Peer Review Group recognised that different levels of development of such skills will be appropriate for different cohorts, but concur with the suggestion that the curriculum should emphasise these as much as possible within existing constraints.

Both from the self-assessments and from the meetings with students and stakeholders, it became clear that there is a lack of feedback to students in both Departments. During interviews with the students, the Peer Review Group learned that contract researchers and PhD students would be willing to assist with the delivery of the teaching programme to a greater extent, such as in tutoring and in giving feedback, even on an unpaid basis. One option to implement this would be to incorporate responsibility for tutorship of a (small) group of 2nd or 3rd year students in the personal development plans of research students and PhD's. Channels for feedback would be also be enhanced.

### **Recommendations:**

- All students in the School should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills throughout their undergraduate career, culminating in a final piece of individual investigative work.
- That means are sought to give students timely feedback on assignments and essays in order to improve their writing skills. Digital learning, the use of Blackboard, annotated examples of good papers, are a few examples of how this could be improved - even for large numbers of students (see also recommendations under Geography).
- That research students and PhD students are considered and developed for giving feedback to undergraduate students.

### *Geography*

Geography provides over 50 modules across four undergraduate programmes as well as contributing significantly to several postgraduate programmes. This is an impressive offering. At the same time it is clear that, due to high student numbers, particularly in the First Year, teaching loads are heavy and are possibly not equally distributed over staff. As a result, teaching is, to a large extent, one-way and theoretical instead of practical. There is limited possibility for providing feedback to students on essays and assignments. A possible (partial) solution to this problem could be blended learning. The Peer Review Group learned that two staff members have been trained now in digital education and that a blended learning module is installed for fieldwork. This module is considered exemplary, also by the Office of Educational Affairs of the College, and could be used as best practice by the Department and more widely by the School of the Human Environment.

The Peer Review Group also noted some overlap with similar modules in other Colleges which might be taught in collaboration. One of the solutions for the teaching load could be to have a critical look at the modules offered and possibly combine modules with other Colleges.

The current lack of a physical geographer was raised as a problem by both staff and students. This situation endangers adequate coverage of the discipline and raises questions regarding the extent to which the degree will be recognised by the Teaching Council. The Peer Review Group agreed that this has been, and continues to be, seriously detrimental to Geography (See recommendation under '*Staffing*').

The Panel considered that the potential for the use of software resources, such as Blackboard, to assist management of large class teaching could be exploited to a greater extent. For example,

where assignments are to be allocated, students could, where feasible, be given the option to sign up on-line for a choice.

The Peer Review Group was very impressed by the continued emphasis placed on fieldwork by the Department. The difficulties of maintaining this aspect of a Geography curriculum is acknowledged and the Department is to be complimented on the commitment shown by staff to this essential aspect of a Geography curriculum.

**Recommendations:**

- That the Department of Geography examines the potential for cooperation with other Departments/Colleges/Research Institutes for some Third Year physical geography modules.
- That blended learning techniques be exploited in order to lessen the teaching load.
- That Blackboard should be used more, especially as an instrument to structure communication with students, assign deadlines to assignments, and collect and provide feedback for assignments and essays.

*Archaeology*

A well balanced and comprehensive curriculum exists for students in the Department of Archaeology with an appropriate range of module offerings at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These were in turn well supported by good equipment and study facilities. A discussion with different student cohorts and stakeholders indicated that there is a large interest in undergraduate fieldwork experience, including excavation. Stakeholders indicated that the employability of Cork graduates would increase considerably if they had more experience in excavation. Stakeholders furthermore indicated a willingness to assist in finding suitable sites for training excavations, placements and internships. The students consulted indicated that they would appreciate and avail of such opportunities. In addition, stakeholders indicated that they would be willing to contribute to teaching, for instance in topics related to project management, communication with contractors etc. The Review Group was impressed by the desire of external stakeholders to work with the Department and believes that these positive relationships should be further exploited to develop internships and placements for undergraduate students, particularly in the area of excavation. (See recommendation under '*External relations*'). The Peer Review Group believes that practical fieldwork elements should be provided onsite and that provision on campus for excavation work would alleviate travel costs for students and allow for greater development of skills development for the market place.

**Recommendations:**

- That a serious attempt is made to re-install participation in excavation as a teaching goal for 2nd or 3rd year students in CK101, and perhaps also in CK107. In the latter course this might be combined with other practical skills in, for instance, GIS modelling.
- That contact with stakeholders is sought with regard to participation in the MA course on archaeological excavations, and in the search for suitable lifelong learning modules (CPD).

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

Both the Archaeology and Geography Departments show impressive research outcomes. There is evidence of many worthwhile publications, a substantial number of which are published in high impact locations. However, the distribution of research output is uneven amongst different members of staff. In the previous Research Quality Review, an over-representation of local, regional and national research topics and papers was mentioned. To some extent this is still the case. The Panel considers that this need not be a problem if those regional and local studies are used to enlighten or illustrate, as case studies, broader research topics which potentially would have international impact. Therefore, in terms of enhancing the international profile of the Departments, a greater emphasis on international journal publication is important.

As new staff enter the School, research areas will need to be reconsidered in the light of a greater emphasis on internationally-focused research. As part of this, consideration should be given to enhancing expertise in areas of existing strong research potential rather than trying merely to fill gaps in the delivery of the existing curriculum. Clear research profiles and a clear connection between research and education will also help to fulfil the stated ambition to attract more international research students. Furthermore, a limited number of larger research clusters should be considered in order to maintain/improve quality, enhance profiles and reduce risks for continuity.

During the visit to the library the panel learnt that the University now offers good possibilities for online publications of theses. Experience elsewhere indicates that online publication of theses possibly has even more impact than paper versions. The panel therefore recommends that both Departments, preferably as a School initiative, should commence an active policy for online publication of research and PhD theses.

Both Self Assessment Reports made it clear that there is only a small budget available for travelling abroad and presenting research at international conferences. Also the work load issue clearly is seen to inhibit initiatives to apply for international research grants.

### **Recommendations:**

- That both Departments devise a strategy to develop larger and stronger research clusters and provide a more international dimension to research. Such a strategy should emphasise publication in peer-reviewed high impact journals rather than book chapters. One way of doing this might be to use existing research as case studies to participate in international debates.
- That both departments publish new and old theses in the online repository of the University.
- Despite the few opportunities offered by the College, time and funding should be actively sought to give younger staff the opportunity to build international networks and apply for research grants. (*see also under Financing*).

## ***Staff Development***



In common with other NUI Universities, UCC has experienced a huge increase in student numbers over the past decade. This has placed enormous demands on a shrinking staff complement. However, there are within both Departments excellent examples of staff development having an impact on teaching and learning. The Peer Review Group was provided with excellent best practice examples of innovative techniques. The Peer Review Group encourages both Departments to make staff aware of new developments and techniques in teaching, learning and research and to encourage them to undertake staff development as appropriate

### *Archaeology*

Despite the slight decline in student numbers, the Department of Archaeology has managed to retain its key personnel and is in the process of successfully replacing one member who has recently left the Department. The present policy regarding teaching is favourable for the development of research potential among younger members of staff; each has a well-defined niche within the Department, and frequently within national provision for Archaeology as a discipline.

### *Geography*

Given the large scale loss of senior staff over the past few years and the generational change in staff together with the loss of major individuals with international and outstanding research profiles, staff development should be accorded high priority. This loss of collective experience has resulted in some demoralisation of the Department as increasing demands on 'middle ranking' and early career staff mount. In particular it has inhibited the development of research potential and internationalisation/networking. One of the key features of this Department is the very high numbers of undergraduate students and the consequent poor staff-student ratio. This will have an impact not only on the ability of staff in Geography to progress their careers but over time will have an impact on the quality of the undergraduate education which must not be overlooked. Both problems are the outcome of the resourcing model and the financial structure of the Departments within the School.

### **Recommendations:**

- That both Departments avail of centrally provided staff development courses where these exist. Staff development requires that assistance be given from central services in key areas such as Research Grant Application Writing, International Networking, Project Management, Techniques for Teaching Large Classes, Interview Techniques, Health and Safety etc. We recommend to the School and Departments that the staff are encouraged to avail of university initiatives that are available in this area and that promotional criteria should recognise participation in such courses.
- That particular consideration be given to the research climate provided for young academics or academics in the early stage of their careers to ensure that they have a clearly defined career path.
- That a more realistic consideration of the additional stress and burden imposed by high student numbers be incorporated into the next version of the workload allocation model.

## ***External Relations***

Most of the external stakeholders met by the Peer Review Group were linked to the Department of Archaeology. Both Departments, however, have extensive links with a number of national and international bodies. The Peer Review Group is of the opinion that linkages with the cognate bodies in the private sector are capable of being enhanced to the advantage of both Departments.

The Peer Review Group was particularly impressed by the willingness of alumni and non-alumni to strengthen linkages with both Departments, and to offer assistance in the development of Continuing Professional Development courses for students. In particular opportunities for internships, placements and on-the-ground training were offered to improve the graduate product in key areas such as report writing, basic statistics, fieldwork experience and presentation skills.

### **Recommendation:**

- That the existing links with private and public sector bodies which arise from former graduates of the School be better exploited.

## ***Support Services***

The Peer Review Group was impressed by the range and quality of support services on offer, in particular the pro-active approach of the Library, Computing Services and Departmental support staff. In both Departments the latter fulfilled important functions and demonstrated laudable innovative techniques.

## ***Staffing***

### *Archaeology*

The imminent appointment of a new staff member in the area of Prehistory is welcomed and will offer opportunities for extending the curriculum in the Department as well as creating potential research collaboration opportunities at an international level. The Review Group is satisfied that the staff complement in the Department is now commensurate with their FTE numbers.

### *Geography*

The Department has been overstretched for some time and the failure to replace retiring staff has been extremely damaging to the Department. Presently, acute difficulties exist in providing an adequate spectrum of physical geography modules which are crucial for the recognition of the degree for teaching purposes. Opportunities for the Department to explore emerging areas and funding opportunities are also severely hampered by staffing limitations. The absence of a

strong cohort of 'middle management' has also been damaging to Department functioning at several levels.

The teaching of large numbers of undergraduates in the Department of Geography is currently not rewarded adequately through the current workload allocation model and this has had a detrimental effect on the ability of staff to carve out time for research.

### **Recommendations:**

- That appointment of a senior physical geographer be prioritised immediately with a view to having an appointment in position by the start of the next academic year. Such an appointment should not be an early career stage individual but should be at Senior Lecturer level or above. This is not lightly suggested and the Review Panel is conscious of university policy in this area. However remedial action and strong academic leadership in this area is urgently required if UCC is to recover lost ground in this area and provide a curriculum which enables its graduates to enter key professions such as teaching in future years.
- That following the appointment of the key position above, a strategic case for further appointments should be made for at least three other posts over the next two years. These should also be specified to assist with the forthcoming programmes being undertaken both at School and Departmental level.
- That a commitment to provide a significant proportion of teaching and examining be sought from the Research Institutes who are involved in Masters programmes such as the Coastal GIS Masters.
- That greater use be made of senior postgraduates in a tutorial programme, to support fieldtrips and practical classes, and conceivably in a new teaching module to assist with alleviating staffing pressures on the full-time staff, and to free some time for them to engage in research networking.

### ***Accommodation***

The Archaeology Department is housed in the Connolly Building; the Geography Department has a building on campus. The accommodation for both departments is adequate - both have dedicated computer rooms for graduate and postgraduate students; the facilities are good and laboratory space is sufficient. The Connolly Building is close enough to campus to access the Library and other facilities easily. The teaching rooms in both Departments are on site and adequate for the number of students in the department.

### ***Financing***

Financing has presented challenges for all concerned in terms of budgetary cuts. In accepting these as inevitable, both Departments have managed to sustain essential core activities to a great extent. This has largely occurred through the dedication and commitment of staff in both Departments. The Peer Review Group acknowledges the additional workload that has been

involved in this and the practical difficulties of continuing to produce quality graduates in an underfinanced environment who can compete effectively in an international employment arena.

Concerns were raised by academics at all levels regarding a lack of funding for research activities. Of particular concern was the absence of national funding opportunities, especially for researchers at an early career stage. The difficulties of financing research involving international collaboration were also raised. While funding schemes for those seeking to coordinate large EU programmes are available at a national level, the need for intermediate financial supports was stressed as more pressing, again particularly so for early career stage staff members.

In this context, suggestions regarding the creation, maintenance or availability of a strategic budget at School level were not received enthusiastically by staff. This would seem to relate to the loose affiliation nature of the School structure. A lack of awareness of what financial supports for research might exist at College level was also apparent.

Financing of the College, Schools and various disciplines were described to the Peer Review Group by the Finance Office. In the financial year 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences ran a deficit of €1.3M and €1.1M respectively.

In this context it was also noted that for the year 2011/12 Archaeology ran a deficit of €78,000 whereas Geography generated a surplus of €723,000. The Review Group considered this figure highly significant in terms of the income generating capability of the School as opposed to the loss making capability of the College in which it is situated. Against this background, the concerns of the Review Group regarding student numbers and staff resources and their support are even more acute. The consequences of sustaining a surplus of this kind in terms of the quality of experience of both staff and students in Geography can be addressed through the recommendations in this report.

### **Recommendation:**

- The Peer Review Group recommends that some proportion of the existing budget, however small, should be allocated to facilitate networking visits for researchers at a higher level than at present. This is important in terms of growing the next generation of researchers. (See also recommendation under 'Staff Development.')
- The location of this budget ought to be ideally at School level, but this issue is secondary to the absolute need for such a fund to support academics with very high workloads in terms of student numbers who have little support for their research activities.

### ***Communications***

#### *School*

Formal communication structures, especially between staff and students, are deficient in both Departments with a lack of formal Departmental meetings, a lack of formal staff-student committees and no/weakly developed personal tutor schemes. Following meetings with students at all levels in both Departments, the latter two issues could be easily implemented and would

improve communications between staff and students. Staff in the Archaeology Department advertise their available office hours on the web. The Peer Review Group considers that the Geography Department could also do this.

#### *Archaeology*

The small size of the archaeology department does not call for complex communication structures. However, the frequency of meetings is now less than a couple of years ago. This may be a point for improvement.

#### *Geography*

Better communications offer significant opportunities for addressing the key challenges facing the Department of Geography. This exists at three levels. Firstly, downward communications from central administration does not always appear to provide an effective channel for encouraging a sense of partnership from staff members. Secondly, internal communications need to be greatly enhanced to promote trust and improve morale within the Department. There is clearly a need to address this on several fronts in order to improve cohesiveness and collegiality. Thirdly, student-staff communications need to be placed on a formal footing.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That the frequency of full staff meetings be increased as currently they are not adequate to engender a shared vision of where the Department is going or how individual contributions are discussed and organised.
- That significant rationalisation of the committee structure in Geography be considered. The existence of 8 committees for 12 full time staff (Geography) is not an efficient use of staff resources and entails multiple involvements and probably some disenchantment for individual staff at times.
- The Peer Review Group recommends a Rotating Chair for staff meetings. The involvement of staff in a shared vision of the Strategy of the Department as well as the development of key managerial skills would be assisted by having staff meetings chaired by staff members other than the Head of Department.
- The Peer Review Group recommends that staff development and departmental cohesion would also be assisted by a series of 'away days' where strategy and team building could be addressed. This might be assisted by the Quality Promotion Unit.
- The Peer Review Group recommends that a report from the Staff-Student Liaison Committee be placed formally on the agenda for staff meetings at least every second month during term time and that both undergraduate and post graduate issues be formally addressed. A representative of the postgraduate community should also be considered for attending staff meetings for items not concerning staff, examinations, appointments etc.

#### ***Implementation of recommendations for improvement made in Peer Review Group Report arising from last quality review***

### *Archaeology*

Given the changeover to a new head of department following the last quality review, the department has addressed most of the recommendations made by the Peer Review Group in 2004 e.g. major recommendations like embedding the survey unit in the department and revising the research clusters have been implemented. Some recommendations appear not to have been met, in particular:

- The recommendation to include group work in all teaching. This recommendation still stands. Though this is not of high importance, it could help to lessen teaching load, while stimulating discussion amongst students (development of critical opinions).

### *Geography*

Within the constraints imposed by financial stringencies, the Department has endeavoured to address most of the recommendations of the previous Peer Review Group Report (2001/02). Several of the recommendations relating to the University management do not appear to have been fully implemented. The most important of these were:

- A recommendation that the First Year quota be held below 250 students
- That additional academic staff must be recruited to attain a student/staff FTE ratio closer to the Arts Faculty average
- In hiring new staff, a strategy to address the age and gender issues is required

In other areas, such as the Library and Building Maintenance, considerable progress has been made.

### ***Compliance with European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area – especially relevant sections of Part 1 of the ESG***

The School adheres to the principles enshrined in the ESG, although student participation in quality assurance could be enhanced by the introduction of more formal student evaluation processes.

***The Peer Review Group is also asked to comment specifically on developments and actions taken since the last quality review undergone by the Department/School.***

### *Geography*

Development of the Department of Geography since 2001/2 has been severely constrained by the loss of seven senior staff. An increase in student-staff ratios of 80% has further stifled innovative developments and research productivity. This was confirmed in the 2009/10 Research Quality Review.

Despite these burdens, the Department has continued to be productive and has scored well in international rankings. It is one of three Departments in the College to achieve a top 200 rating

in the QS World University Rankings. Innovations have occurred in curriculum and course structures and new degree programmes have emerged. Research activity has increased and staff are engaged in various research institutes across the campus. A strong public profile has been developed by the Department in areas such as migration studies, GIS, Remote Sensing and marine geomorphology.

The PRG believes that continued, stable representation of the discipline by its leadership will strengthen the department and ensure its successful future.

### *Archaeology*

The last Quality Improvement Plan of Archaeology was drafted in 2004, before the present Head of Department was appointed. The most important recommendations have all been met, i.e. the installation of a new Head of Department, improvement of the facilities of the Connelly building. These were thought to be 'appalling' whereas the panel now rate them as more than adequate and well suited to the Department. Also the recommendation to install more clearly visible research groups has been met. The recommendations of the 2010 Research Quality Review were in line with the recommendations of the present Peer Review Group (see Research Section above). This indicates that, in this respect, work is still in progress and that the Department still has to work on international visibility.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### *Archaeology*

The Department of Archaeology did not provide the Peer Review Group with any recommendations for improvement. The Department stated a preference to await the Peer Review Group report to indicate weaknesses and would base their 2014-2018 strategic plan on its recommendations. The Peer Review Group would have preferred the Department to show more strategic vision and self-reflection in this section of the self-assessment.

### *Geography*

The Department of Geography made the following recommendations for improvement.

1. It is critical that additional staff are appointed to the Department immediately in order to maintain standards and to deliver our programme more effectively. Our significantly higher than average FTE's indicate that such appointments should be confirmed immediately. For example, it is imperative that the physical geography post (currently a contract position) be made permanent given its importance to the delivery of the entire programme and the integrity of the BA/BSc degrees. The Teaching Council of Ireland requires that students have a substantial grounding in both physical and human geography.

[http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/\\_fileupload/Registration/AutoQuals/Autoquals%20update%2025%20April%202013.pdf](http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/_fileupload/Registration/AutoQuals/Autoquals%20update%2025%20April%202013.pdf)

-The Peer Review Group endorses this recommendation as the most pressing priority facing the Department and considers such an appointment must be made at a senior level to ensure the leadership qualities of departed senior staff are adequately replaced.

2. The Department needs to adopt a more robust policy of curriculum review and innovation in the light of the new demands being placed on it by the non-replacement of retired staff and the expectations of our student body.

-Several recommendations regarding course delivery and assessment are made elsewhere in this report in connection with this matter.

3. The Department needs to consider ways in which we can increase the number of Upper Second Class and First Class honours graduates, as well as encouraging the academic development of our top performing students throughout their degree.

-Safeguarding of academic standards must remain the principal objective. However, this can be accomplished in tandem with improving overall performance. It is important to avoid a 'levelling down process' and to create conditions for excellence to flourish. The Department can be entrusted to ensure this.

4. Given the extent and range of the programmes which the Department is engaged in there is an opportunity for revising and potentially streamlining our offerings. Such a process would allow for greater diversity in assessment and delivery modes (responding to student feedback) and encourage greater self-directed learning.

-The Peer Review Group concurs with this sentiment. As staff resources are stretched close to breaking point, streamlining is essential. Core areas of the subject however must remain protected.

5. The Department needs to be much more strategic in the development of new programmes. There is a risk of staff spreading themselves too thinly, given the levels of investment in existing programmes.

-There is already a risk that spreading of staff resources too thinly has gone too far. Particularly with the proposed new postgraduate programmes, care must be taken that the undergraduate programme is not weakened. Suggestions elsewhere in this report for avoiding teaching 'overload' exist.

6. To meet the diverse needs and expectations of our student body it is important that staff are continually encouraged to engage in professional development especially in new technologies, pedagogical approaches and modes of assessment.



-Greater use of CPD courses are strongly recommended, especially for younger members of staff.

7. While the Department has developed its international profile there is scope for continued expansion in this area, incorporating both staff/student exchanges and recruitment to its various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Such recruitment and exchanges will only enhance the teaching and learning environment.

-This should be undertaken as part of a strategic plan for internationalisation.

8. An important initiative for the Department is to establish an external advisory group to comment on the curriculum and its applicability to contemporary society as well the development of employability attributes.

-Greater use of the alumnus community should be made. A willingness on the part of stakeholders to participate was evident in the meetings held with them and specific recommendations are made above.

9. The Department library funding and allocation of library resourcing needs continuous monitoring as, for example, the current budget of €19,262 does not provide for any expansion of specialist peer reviewed journals, requested on occasion by staff. The library budget has also been subject to cuts, and whilst judiciously managed generally, these have led during 2013 to a long pause in funding for book purchases. This is unsatisfactory. The Library's policy to 'claw-back' unspent funding for book-purchases on an annual basis has also not benefited the Department and we would argue more flexibility in this regard should be developed in order to grow the library collection in the long term.

-Unspent Library Budget should be allocated to active Departments who stretch their budget. Both Geography and Archaeology are interdisciplinary Departments whose book and periodical budget services many other Departments. This should be negotiated with the Library.

## **Recommendations for Improvement made by the Peer Review Group**

### *School of the Human Environment*

- The School structure be used more effectively to ensure participation for all staff in the decision-making processes of the College and University.
- That the full potential of the School for the disciplines in relation to strategic matters such as resourcing in the broadest sense, innovative academic development, particularly in the areas of future research and where the disciplines meet, for example, in the fields of geomorphology, GIS, landscape and historical geography, be explored.
- That the School be utilised in relation to support creative and innovative teaching, the teaching of academic transferable skills, grant writing for research students and cartographic skills at undergraduate levels.

### *Departmental organisation and planning*

- That a medium planning cycle for staff deployment be introduced.

### *Teaching and Learning*

- That the Department of Geography examines the potential for cooperation with other Departments/Colleges for some third year physical geography modules.
- That a serious attempt is made to re-install participation in excavation as a teaching goal for 2nd or 3rd year students in CK101 and maybe also CK107. In the latter course this might be combined with other practical skills in for instance GIS modelling.
- That participation of stakeholders is sought with regard to participation in the MA course on archaeological excavations, and in the search for suitable lifelong learning modules (CPD).
- All students in the School should be encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills throughout their undergraduate career culminating in a final piece of individual investigative work.

### *Research and scholarly activity*

- That both departments devise a strategy to develop larger and stronger research clusters and provide a more international dimension to research. This should emphasise publication in peer-reviewed high impact journals rather than book chapters. One way of doing this might be to use existing research as case studies to participate in international debates.

### *Staff development*

- That both Departments avail of centrally provided staff development courses where these exist. Staff development requires that assistance be given from central services in key areas such as Research Grant Application Writing, International Networking, Project Management, Techniques for Teaching Large Classes, Interview Techniques, Health and Safety etc. We recommend to the School and departments that the staff are encouraged to avail of University initiatives that are available in this area and that promotional criteria should recognise participation in such courses.
- That consideration be given to the research climate provided for young researchers to ensure that they have a career path.
- That a more realistic consideration of the additional stress and burden imposed by high student numbers be incorporated into the next version of the workload allocation model.

### *External relations*

- That the existing links with private and public sector bodies which arise from former graduates of the School be better exploited.

### *Staffing*

- That for the Department of Geography the recruitment of a senior physical geographer be prioritised immediately with a view to having an individual in position by the start of the next academic year. Such an appointment should not be an early career stage individual but should be at Senior Lecturer level or above. This is not lightly suggested and the Review Panel is conscious of university policy in this area. However remedial action and strong academic leadership in this area is urgently required if UCC is to recover lost ground in this area and provide a curriculum which enables its graduates to enter key professions such as teaching in future years.
- That following the appointment of the key position above, a strategic case for further appointments should be made for at least three other posts in Geography over the next two years. These should also be specified to assist with the forthcoming programmes being undertaken both at school and departmental level.
- That a commitment to provide a proportion of teaching and examining be sought from the Research Institutes who are involved in Masters programmes such as the Coastal GIS Masters.
- That, for Geography, greater use be made of senior postgraduates in a tutorial programme, to support fieldtrips and practical classes, and conceivably in a new teaching module to assist with alleviating staffing pressures on the full time staff and to free some time for them to engage in research networking.

### *Financing*

- The Review Group recommends that some proportion of existing budget, however small, should be allocated to facilitate networking visits for researchers at a higher level than at present. This is important in terms of growing the next generation of researchers.

### *Communications*

- That, for Geography, the frequency of full staff meetings be increased as currently they are not adequate to engender a shared vision of where the Department is going or how individual contributions are discussed and organised.
- That significant rationalisation of the committee structure in Geography be considered. The existence of 8 committees for 12 full time staff (Geography) is not an efficient use of staff resources and entails multiple involvements and probably some disenchantment for individual staff at times.
- The Peer Review Group recommends a rotating chair for staff meetings. The involvement of staff in a shared vision of the Strategy of the Department as well as the development of key managerial skills would be assisted by having staff meetings chaired by staff members other than the Head of Department.
- We would recommend that Staff development and departmental cohesion would also be assisted by a series of 'away days' where strategy and team building could be addressed. This might be assisted by the Quality Promotion Unit.
- We recommend that a report from the Staff-Student Liaison Committee be placed formally on the agenda for staff meetings at least every second month during term time and that both undergraduate and post graduate issues be formally addressed. A

representative of the postgraduate community should also be considered for attending staff meetings for items not concerning staff, examinations, appointments etc.

## ***SCHOOL OF THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT***

### **PEER REVIEW GROUP SITE VISIT**

#### **TIMETABLE**

#### **In Summary**

Monday 9 December: The Peer Review Group (PRG) arrives at the River Lee Hotel for a briefing, followed by an informal dinner with School staff members.

Tuesday 10 December: The PRG considers the Self-Assessment Report and meets with school staff, student and stakeholder representatives. A working private dinner is held that evening for the PRG.

Wednesday 11 December: The PRG meets with relevant officers of UCC. An exit presentation is given by the PRG to all members of the School. A working private dinner is held that evening for the PRG in order to finalise the report. This is the final evening of the review.

Thursday 12 December: External PRG members depart.

<b>Monday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013</b>	
16.00 – 18.00	Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group. Briefing by: to be confirmed. 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.  <b>Venue: Tower Room, River Lee Hotel</b>
18.45	Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group & Head of School of Geography & Archaeology including the School Co-ordinating Committee:  Dr. Darius Bartlett, Geography Dr. Ben Geary, Archaeology Dr. Theresa Kenna, Geography Professor Donald Lyons, Geography Professor William O'Brien, Archaeology Mr. John Sheehan, Archaeology  <b>Venue: The Weir Restaurant, River Lee Hotel</b>

**Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013**

**Venue: Rm. 1.17, Tower Room 1, North Wing, Main Quad**  
*(unless otherwise specified)*

08.30 – 08.45	Convening of Peer Review Group
08.45 – 09.30	Professor William O'Brien, Head of School
09.30 – 10.30	Group meeting with all School staff <b>Venue: Council Room, North Wing, Main Quadrangle</b>
10.30 – 11.00	Professor Paul Giller, Registrar and Senior Vice-President for Academic Affairs Tea/coffee
11.00 – 12.15	<b>Private meetings with individual staff members</b> 11.00: Dr. Darius Bartlett, Geography 11.15: Dr. Therese Kenna, Geography 11.30: Ms. Roisin Murphy, Geography 11.45: Ms. Bernadette O'Mahony, Geography 12.00: Dr. Colin Sage, Geography
12.15 – 12.45	Professor Donald Lyons – Head of Department of Geography
12.45 – 13.45	Working lunch
13.45 – 14.30	Visit to Archaeology facilities of School, escorted by Head of School and TBC
14.30 – 15.00	Professor William O'Brien – Head of Department of Archaeology
15.00 - 15.40	<u>Representatives of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Students</u> Ms. Clare Busher O'Sullivan, BA 2, Archaeology Ms. Niamh Cleary, BA 1, Archaeology Mr. Stephen Waugh, BA 2, Archaeology  Ms. Aoife Crotty, BA 1, Geography Mr. Glen Kelly, BMus 1, Geography Ms. Katie O'Sullivan, BA Joint 2, Geography Mr. Sean Quaid, BSc Earth Sci, Geography Mr. Brendan Sweeney, BA Joint 2, Geography
15.40 – 16.20	<u>Representatives of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Year Students</u> Mr. John Paul Daly, BA 3, Archaeology Ms. Caragh May O'Mahony, BA 3, Archaeology Ms. Lesley Anne Radcliff, BA 3, Archaeology  Ms. Stephanie Arcusa, BSc Earth Science 4, Geography Mr. Pdraig Collins, BA Joint 3, Geography Mr. Colin Hogan, BA (Drama & Theatre Studies) 3, Geography Ms. Katie McSweeney, BA Major 3, Geography Mr. John Patrick Murphy, BSc Earth Science 3, Geography Ms. Tammy Rodgers, BA Joint 3, Geography  Mr. Jason Sullivan, BSc 4, Geography

16.20 – 16.55	<p><u>Representatives of Graduate Students</u></p> <p>Ms. Susan Lyons, PhD 2, Archaeology  Mr. Derek O’Brien, MPhil, Archaeology  Mr. Donncha Sheehan, MA (Archaeological Excavation), Archaeology  Ms. Jane Wiegand, MA (Human Osteoarchaeology), Archaeology</p> <p>Mr. Stephen Browne, MA (European Dev Studies), Geography  Mr. Sean Lynch, MSc GIS &amp; Remote Sensing, Geography  Ms. Denise Macken, MA (European Dev Studies), Geography  Ms. Sinead O’Connor, PhD 3, Geography  Mr. Richard Scriven, PhD 3, Geography</p>
17.00 – 18.00	<p><u>Representatives of stakeholders, past graduates and employers</u></p> <p>Ms. Ciara Brett, Archaeologist, Cork City Council  Mr. Paul MacCotter, Historical Consultant (Arch)  Mr. Brian Doyle, Cork Airport Authority (Geog)  Mr. Damien Shields, Rubicon Heritage Services (Arch)  Dr. Richard Unitt, Geology, School of BEES  Mr. Thomas O’Neill, Spike Island Project</p> <p><b>Venue: Staff Common Room, North Wing, Main Quadrangle</b></p>
19.00	<p>Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day, a followed by a working private dinner.</p> <p><b>Venue: Tower Room, River Lee Hotel</b></p>

<b>Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013</b>	
<b>Venue: Rm 1.17, Tower Room 1, North Wing, Main Quad</b> <i>(unless otherwise specified)</i>	
08.30 – 09.00	Convening of Peer Review Group
09.00 – 09.45	Visit to Geography facilities of School, escorted by Head of School and TBC
09.45 – 10.00	Return to Main Campus
10.00 – 10.45	Dr. David O’Connell, Director of Research Support Services Dr. Bettie Higgs, Deputising for the Vice-President for Teaching and Learning
10.45 – 11.00	Tea/coffee
11.00 – 11.15	Mr. Cormac McSweeney, Finance Office
11.15 – 12.30	Visit to UCC Library, meeting with Mr. Ronan Madden, Subject Librarian, Boole Library. <b>Venue: Seminar Room, Boole Library</b>
12.30 – 13.00	Professor Caroline Fennell, Head of College Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences

13.00 – 14.00	Working lunch
14.00 – 16.15	Preparation of first draft of final report
16.15 – 16.45	Professor William O’Brien, Head of School
17.00 – 17.30	<p>Exit presentation to all staff, to be made by the Chair of the Peer Review Group or other member of Peer Review Group as agreed, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group .</p> <p>This presentation is <u>not</u> for discussion at this time.</p> <p><b>Venue: Council Room, North Wing, Main Quadrangle</b></p>
19.00	<p>Working private dinner for members of the Peer Review Group to complete drafting of report and finalisation of arrangements for completion and submission of final report.</p> <p><b>Venue: Tower Room, River Lee Hotel</b></p>