

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

Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Department of Applied Social Studies

Academic Year 2005/06

12th January 2006

Members of the Peer Review Group (PRG)

Professor Máirtín Ó Fathaigh, Centre for Adult Continuing Education, UCC (Chair)

Professor Denis O’Sullivan, Department of Education, UCC

Professor Gabriel Kiely, School of Applied Social Science, University College
Dublin, Ireland

Professor Sue Wise, Department of Applied Social Science, University of Lancaster, UK.

Timetable of the site visit

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

The reviewers found the timetable to be adequate and appropriate for the needs of the review. The timetable enabled meetings with relevant stakeholders to take place in addition to a tour of the facilities available to the Department. The timetable also allowed for a preliminary drafting of the report of the reviewers during the visit.

PEER REVIEW

Methodology

All members of the Peer Review Group (PRG) participated in all discussions during the two days of the site visit. The external members of the PRG took the lead in discussions particularly relating to the teaching, research and scholarly activities of the Department. All members engaged in discussion on the management of the Department, external relations, support services and other issues.

Site Visit

The site visit was conducted as per the timetable in Appendix A. All key stakeholders were met and discussions were held on all issues relating to the activities of the Department. During these discussions the PRG emphasised the role of the review team as being one of a ‘critical friend’ to the Department and with the primary purpose of assisting the Department in its forward planning for improvement in the

future. The role of the reviewers in quality assuring the activities of the Department was also stressed. The site visit also included a tour of the facilities in the buildings allocated to the Department by the University, the UCC Library and of the central areas of the campus.

Peer Review Group Report

The Report of the PRG was drafted during the afternoon and evening of the second day of the site visit. The external members took particular responsibility for drafting the sections on teaching and learning, research and scholarly activity with all members participating in the drafting of the other sections. The report was finalised following the site visit via email communications. All members of the PRG agreed to the final report.

OVERALL ANALYSIS

Self-Assessment Report (SAR)

The PRG noted that the Department of Applied Social Studies is a large Department within the College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences in UCC and has undergone considerable expansion as a result of legislative and structural changes in Irish society in recent years. The Department provides a range of responses and learning/training experiences in both academic and professional activities in relation to a growing and diverse multi-cultural cohort of learners.

The PRG wished to affirm the high esteem in which the Department's contributions are held, nationally and internationally. Equally, the PRG were impressed by the manner in which senior University personnel highly valued the Department's contributions, and were familiar with the nature of its work and plans for the future.

The PRG commended the Department for its thoroughly prepared and comprehensive SAR submitted in good time to the PRG. The PRG noted and welcomed the coherence that was evident between the Mission Statement of the Department, the programmes being provided, the services to learners and the strategic plans for the future. The documents submitted indicated that the Department had contributed very

sincerely to the process of preparation for the quality review and their report greatly assisted the PRG in its deliberations. The PRG considered that the process of engagement with the preparation for the review by all members of the Department was as important as the final documents in enabling the Department to plan for improvement and development of departmental activities. The process of self-reflection and its benefits were as obvious to the members of the PRG as the documentation attaching to the review. This opinion was confirmed during the discussions that took place during the site visit.

Whilst the PRG did note some inconsistencies in the document submitted, clarifications were provided during the site visit in meetings with both the staff of the Department and Officers of the University. All requests for additional information were accommodated and met with promptly and thoroughly.

The PRG commended the delineation of the six core principles underpinning the mission of the Department and defined in the SAR as

- i. to provide critical analysis of contemporary social and policy trends*
- ii. to promote access through widening participation in third level education*
- iii. to promote the continuing development of more reflexive approaches in professional training and post-qualifying studies for the social professions*
- iv. to produce quality research with a view to promoting knowledge and understanding*
- v. to focus the resources of third level education on social justice and the promotion of civil society*
- vi. to continue to develop our international orientation and extend our global links.*

The PRG supported these principles and commended the adoption of these by the Department. In addition the PRG suggested that the Department might revisit the core principles and identify where fourth level education applies and orient the Department's energies and activities on that basis.

Decision-making, budgets, workloads, sabbaticals, induction, staff development, appointments, promotions and mentoring were all issues raised by staff in the SAR. Comments on these issues by the PRG are included in the relevant sections in this report.

The PRG noted and commended in particular the role of the Department in facilitating access to the programmes by non-traditional students, including those with a disability, and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The PRG noted the very high percentage of mature students availing of programmes offered by the Department. The Department plays a very active role in community education and is very energetic in this area.

The PRG was impressed by the commitment of the Department to the broader social policy and vision of the University and noted that it is playing an important role in bringing this vision to fruition. This is evident in its flexible delivery of programmes in different outreach settings, in its interactions with community education partners, and in an advocacy role within the institution in favour of participation by non-traditional learners. Dealing with non-traditional learners places additional constraints on the Department and the PRG was given to understand that the new Resource Allocation Model, currently under development in the University, will recognise this and that additional supports (offices and staff) are available within UCC for assisting departments in the facilitation of non-traditional learners.

SWOT Analysis

The PRG noted that the Department had prepared a very comprehensive SWOT analysis and that all staff had engaged with the process. The PRG commended the Department for this and noted that much benefit to the Department had been derived from the exercise.

The PRG noted in particular the involvement of the Department of Applied Social Studies with the IUQB project on strategic planning in academic departments and commended the in-depth analysis that led to the development of the departmental strategic plan.

Benchmarking

The PRG noted that the Department conducted a benchmarking exercise against the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol and the Department of Sociology and Applied Social Studies, University of Ulster. The Department carried out a thorough benchmarking exercise. It was unclear to the PRG why the University of Bristol was selected for comparison, as the two Departments appear quite different. Nonetheless, the Department compared favourably against Bristol despite the fact there is a much stronger emphasis on research activity there.

FINDINGS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP

Department Details

The PRG was unclear as to the precise employment status of the staff cohort. The PRG feels this is a very important issue and a very high percentage of academic staff are at a lower grade. The implications for the Department and the University of a large number of staff at the junior levels has ongoing effects on the efforts and negative implications for the motivation of the staff of the Department, which could include the ability to attract significant funding for research or the supervision of research students. There is a real need to consider the requirements of these staff. This is a primary area of concern for many staff of the Department and the PRG recognise and acknowledge the need to address this. The PRG will address this from the point of view of recommendations to help the Department in future planning.

The PRG noted that in its final discussion with Professor Powell he expressed the view that it was Department policy that the norm should be one of permanent appointments. The PRG supports this position.

The PRG, in the document supplied and in discussions with all stakeholders (staff, students, college officers), were made aware of and concerned about the inadequacies in the physical infrastructure of the facilities available to the Department. The PRG noted that plans to ameliorate the infrastructural inadequacies are at an advanced stage and have the support of University authorities. The PRG fully support the realisation of these plans.

The PRG were impressed by the qualifications of the administrative staff and their continuing engagement with professional training.

The PRG was very conscious of the gender imbalance in academic appointments at the senior level within the Department. The PRG recommends that this issue be addressed in the context of the recommendations on personal and career progression for staff within the Department.

Department Organisation & Planning

The PRG supported the suggestion, made in the SAR and confirmed in meetings with staff of the Department during the site visit, that an elected Department Management Committee be established to support the Head of Department and enhance the quality of decision-making within the Department.

The PRG noted that there was no clear statement of the workloads of academic staff. Data regarding workloads supplied in the SAR was unclear and difficult to interpret. Comparison of workloads (comprising the elements of teaching, research, administrative) across staff could not be made. Some clarification was obtained in meetings with the staff. The PRG were very strongly of the view that workloads should be transparent and equitable. The PRG recommended that a formula for allocation of workloads should be defined clearly and consultation with the staff made prior to allocation. The PRG noted that in the SAR documentation questions were raised about the current method of workload allocation and whether the time spent on administrative and research activities is adequately acknowledged and measured. The PRG acknowledged that it is not possible to include everything in a workload model but some elements, for example, the work involved in practice placement visits, etc. ought to be included.

The PRG discerned the manner in which the particular programme activity of staff represented a source of primary identification within the Department and wondered about the implications of this for overall collegiality in the work of the Department

members. The PRG recommended that this policy be reviewed, while commending the positive benefits of staff with similar interests working closely together.

Teaching & Learning

The PRG acknowledged the strengths of the Department in the teaching of its students, and the dedication of the time spent by staff in support of the teaching activities of the Department. The PRG also commended the efforts of staff in dealing with the learning needs of both traditional and non-traditional students. This is a key strength of the Department.

The PRG were of the opinion that one of the major issues facing the Department is how to balance the provision of teaching at the present level and the increase in research commitments, which is likely to ensue over the next five years. This strong commitment to teaching in the particular manner adopted by the Department can have negative effects on the potential for academic and career development of staff. The PRG also noted the significant administrative load of the academic staff and observed that this leaves little time for engagement in research activities.

There are three distinct areas of study within the Department and staff met with the PRG within these affiliations. We note from the staff questionnaires that concerns were raised around whether the course team structure in the Department inhibited dialogue and development of synergies across course teams. This also was raised as an issue in meetings with the individual groups. The PRG were uncertain as to the long-term plan in the Department for Youth and Community Work. The PRG noted that the Master's Degree in Youth and Community Work has been phased out and that the departmental strategic plan does not contain any proposal for recruitment of senior staff in this area.

The PRG noted that the Department offers a number of programmes with relatively small numbers of students. The PRG noted the comment of the Department that these programmes are pilot programmes arising from initiatives by the Department aimed at developing fourth level education in the disciplines relevant to the activities of the Department. The PRG also noted that these programmes appear to be dedicated, and

the PRG suggested that the Department continue to review these programmes with a view to consideration of more shared teaching and maximising the efficiencies and avoidance of duplication of teaching. The PRG felt that some rationalisation of effort around these programmes could result in a freeing-up of some time, which could be used to increase the research activity and output of the Department.

In relation to the B. Social Work European Pathways, the PRG noted the lack of uptake of language options by students on the course and a lack of emphasis on the European dimension. The PRG strongly recommended a reconsideration of the programme in the light of these comments.

The staff responsible for the programmes in Youth and Community Work feel that the Department is under-resourcing the area. Concerns were raised at the lack of resources in Youth and Community Work and some evidence was provided that tutors are not paid and working in a voluntary capacity.

Research & Scholarly Activity

The PRG suggested that the Department might revisit the core principles referred to earlier and identify where fourth level education and publication of research in peer reviewed journals applies with a view to orienting the energies and activities of the Department more in this direction. The PRG recognised that the University's strategic plan for the next five years, currently under development, is going to place a strong emphasis on fourth level education and that it will be necessary for all academic disciplines and departments to focus energies on research and on support of postgraduate research students. The PRG considered that the staff of the Department must focus on and prioritise the dissemination of research in peer-reviewed journals and publications, and must aspire to regular and systematic publication of their research.

The balance between the teaching and the research perhaps should be included in the core principles and operationalised at departmental level.

The PRG, while acknowledging a high research publication output by the Department, felt that this could be improved if staff are in permanent positions. The PRG noted that the research output is uneven across the academic staff. The PRG noted from the information supplied by the Department and authenticated by the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences that twenty-one research grants had been received by a number of staff of the Department since 1999, with all but two of these from sources external to UCC. The PRG also noted that only 18% of the staff of the Department were either satisfied or very satisfied with the support provided by the University for accessing research funding.

The PRG acknowledged the comments of the Department in the SAR in relation to the possibilities for expansion of the research graduate cohort. The PRG noted the aspirations of the Department to increase the numbers of research students by one-third over the next five years and that this is in accord with University policy. The PRG noted that a proportion of the staff have PhD qualifications and these staff form a core to supervise additional research students.

The PRG acknowledged the two new programmes developed by the Department in the last couple of years – the practitioner doctorate in Social Sciences and the M.Soc.Sc. (by Portfolio). However, the PRG were of the view that the Department should examine how to further develop these aspirations and should consider the effect of this expansion on the teaching commitments of the Department. The Department must re-evaluate the teaching activities of the Department.

The PRG noted in the SAR staff questionnaires that 60% of the staff were dissatisfied with the support for personal research activity. This was echoed in the meetings the reviewers held with staff.

The PRG noted the need to ensure that PhD students are distributed equitably among staff, noting the importance of PhD supervision for staff in terms of intellectual stimulation and for promotion. Staff should also promote their capacity for supervision of a PhD student/encourage students to consider the possibilities of pursuing PhD studies in their area(s) of interest.

Staff Development

The PRG noted and commended the fact that issues including staff development and sabbatical leave, staff mentoring, and enhancement of communication within the Department, which were raised by staff in the progress of the preparation for the review, are all being addressed in the strategic plan. The departmental strategic plan has proposed means of addressing these issues. The course teams appear to be effective in facilitating communication between staff members, providing academic staff with support and in sharing of information. However the existence of the course teams does not address the comments made in SAR about the desire to work in a less hierarchical environment and to contribute to decision-making in the Department.

External Relations

The PRG found that the agency stakeholders, met with during the site visit, supported the activities of the Department and their role in the delivery of professional courses. Feedback mechanisms for improvement were identified as being important. Concern was expressed at the gate-keeping function of the University in relation to professional practice. This particularly related to the acceptance of students onto programmes to which the students may not be suited versus the desire to increase student numbers. This has already been discussed with the Department. The PRG recommend that thresholds of acceptability in terms of the student intake be developed, articulated and applied.

This has significant implications for both programmes and the Department. The University does have a gate-keeping function in this regard. A specific area of concern in relation to the B. Social Work degree was the need to provide a fallback academic qualification which could be made available to students unsuited to professional practice.

Support Services

Support services for the most part seemed to be adequate. The Library seemed well stocked and has made available a wide range of learning materials which can be accessed through the internet. This facility is of particular importance given the

outreach nature of many of the Department's programmes and its student profile. Because of the special learning needs of many of the students there seemed to be insufficient support provided by the University to the Department in meeting these needs. This resulted in an added burden for the academic staff.

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

The PRG commended the methodology used by the Department in the preparation for the quality review. The SWOT analysis and benchmarking exercises were carried out in an inclusive manner and were very comprehensive, leading to a very good overall analysis in the Self-Assessment Report. The Department established a small co-ordinating committee to oversee the preparation for the review and the documentation and evidence were detailed and thorough.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMNT

Recommendations for improvement made by the Department

The PRG noted that there was some confusion concerning the recommendations for improvement made in the strategic plan of the Department and those made in the SAR. The recommendations for improvement in the SAR all appear to require resources external to the Department. Many of the recommendations for improvement in the strategic plan are within the remit of the Department to implement. The PRG felt it necessary to acknowledge that strategies for improvement will require actions both by the Department and the University. The PRG noted the recommendations made by the Department in the SAR (both explicit and implicit) and has incorporated these into the recommendations for improvement below, as deemed appropriate by the PRG.

Recommendations for improvement made by the Peer Review Group

The PRG recommended that:

1. An elected Department Management Committee be established, representative of all categories of staff, which reports to the Head of Department and the Departmental Committee.
2. The policy whereby programme activity of staff represents a source of primary identification within the Department be reviewed.
3. There be established a programme of continuing professional development for all staff which would include support systems for personal research activity, personal and departmental priority development areas, career progression, etc.
4. The Department be housed in appropriate space as soon as possible.
5. Appointments, where possible, should be advertised and filled in a permanent capacity.
6. The University should recognise the special needs of the non-traditional students by making available adequate support services.
7. The Department reflect on the teaching culture within the Department with a view to enabling the growth of research activities. This reflection should include a review of programmes with small numbers of students with a view to consideration of more shared teaching and maximising the efficiencies and avoidance of duplication of teaching.
8. The language elements and emphasis on the European dimension of the B. Social Work European Pathways Programme be reconsidered.

9. The Department revisit the core principles as defined in the SAR with a view to identifying where fourth level education applies and orient the Department's energies and activities on that basis.
10. The staff of the Department increase contributions to peer-reviewed journals and publications.
11. A clear formula for the measurement and allocation of academic workloads be developed and implemented in a transparent fashion.

Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit

Department of Applied Social Studies

Wednesday 16th November 2005

- 17.30 Meeting of members of the Peer Review Group
Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit, Dr. N. Ryan.
Group agrees final work schedule and assignment of tasks for the following 2 days.
Views are exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.
- 19.30 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group, Head of Department and Departmental Co-ordinating Committee.

Thursday 17th November 2005

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group in Beara Room, Student Centre
Consideration of Self-Assessment Report
- 09.00 Professor Fred Powell, Head of Department
- 09.30 Staff of the Department responsible for Programmes in Social Work
Mr. Kenneth Burns
Professor Alastair Christie
Ms. Lena Deevy
Mr. Martin Geoghegan
Ms. Carmel Halton
Ms. Hilary Jenkinson
Ms. Pat Lenihan
Dr. Debby Lynch
Ms. Cynthia Martin
Ms. Simone McCaughren
Ms. Brenda Morris
Dr. Marian Murphy
Ms. Ruth Murray
Ms. Deirdre Quirke
Ms. Rachel Rice
Ms. Mary Ring
Ms. Lydia Sapouna
Dr. Mary Wilson
- 10.30 Tea/Coffee
- 10.45 Staff of the Department responsible for Programmes in Social Policy
Dr. Mairéad Considine
Ms. Helen Duggan
Dr. Fiona Dukelow

Dr. Claire Edwards
Ms. Eluska Fernandez
Mr. Joe Finnerty
Ms. Eileen Hogan
Dr. Deirdre Horgan
Dr. Liz Kiely
Ms. Shirley Martin
Ms. Orla McDonald
Dr. Cathal O'Connell
Ms. Phil O'Sullivan
Dr. Orla O'Donovan

11.45 Staff of the Department responsible for Programmes in Youth & Community Work

Dr. Paul Burgess
Mr. Ashok Kelkar
Mr. Pat Leahy
Ms. Rosie Meade
Mr. Michael O'hAodáin
Mr. Dave O'Donovan
Ms. Cindy O'Shea

13.00 Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group

13.30 Professor Peter Kennedy, Vice-President for Research Policy & Support

14.00 Visit to core facilities of Department. Review Team escorted by Professor F. Powell

15.00 Representatives of B Social Science Undergraduate Students

Tom McNally, BSocSc I
Graham Desmond, BSocSc I
Helen Driscoll, BSocSc II
Celine McCarney, BSocSc II
Steve Warner, BSocSc III
Liz O' Donovan, BSocSc III

15.30 Representatives of B Social Work Undergraduate Students

Jill Barrett, BSW I
Emily Coffey, BSW I
Veronica Murphy, BSW II
Anne Golden, BSW II
Kate Moynihan, BSW III
Mairead Carmody, BSW IV
Carmel Martin, BSW IV

16.00 Representatives of B Youth & Community Work Undergraduate Students

Colette O'Connor, BYCW I
Vincent Mulherne, BYCW I
Suzanne Whitty, BCYW II
Ifeoma Ogunne, BCYW II
Michael Collins, BCYW III

Margaret Claire McCarthy, BCYW III

16.30 Representatives of Research Postgraduates

Catherine McCarthy, M Social Policy
Fiachra Ó Súilleabháin, DSocSc
Stephen Molloy, MSW I
Una Nugent, MSW I
Aine O'Connor, MSW I *or* Una Stapleton, MSW I
Susan Ryan, MSW II
Rachel Hennessy, MSW II
Michelle Kennedy, MSW II
Ms. Brenda Healy, PhD Social Policy

17.00 Representatives of recent graduates, employers and other stakeholders

- Mr. Seamus Bane, *National Youth Federation*
- Mr. David Hayes, *Child Guidance, Health Board & Recent Grad*
- Ms. Margot Hayes, *The Glen Resource Centre*
- Ms. Aideen Jackson, *Principal Social Worker*
- Mr. Sean Moriarty, *Assistant Principal Officer*
- Mr. Moss Naughton, *2004 Graduate*
- Ms. Grace O'Sullivan, *2003 Graduate*
- Ms. Christine Tanner, *Health Service Executive*

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.

Friday 18th November 2005

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group in Professor Fred Powell's office, Department of Applied Social Studies, Donovan's Road
- 09.00 Professor Paul Giller, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs
- 09.30 Mr. Michael O'Sullivan, Vice-President for Planning, Communications & Development
- 10.00 Visit to Boole Library, meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services and Ms. Rosarii Buttimer, Social Sciences Librarian
- 11.00 Tea/coffee
- 11.15 Ms. Carmel Cotter, Finance Office
- 11.30 Professor David Cox, Acting Head, College of Arts, Celtic Studies & Social Sciences/Dean of Faculty of Arts
- 12.00 Consideration of issues by PRG
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of the Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Preparation of first draft of final report

- 16.30 Professor Fred Powell, Head of Department
- 17.00 Exit presentation made to all staff of the Unit by the Chair 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.

Saturday 19th November 2005

Externs depart