

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

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**Department of Applied Psychology**

**Academic Year 2004/05**

**10<sup>th</sup> May 2005**

## **MEMBERS OF THE PEER REVIEW GROUP (PRG):**

Professor Ivan Perry, Department of Epidemiology & Public Health, UCC (Chair)

Professor Ted Dinan, Department of Psychiatry, UCC (Rapporteur)

Professor Aidan Moran, Department of Psychology, UCD, Ireland

Professor Ann Colley, School of Psychology, University of Leicester, UK

## **PEER REVIEW**

This report arises from a visit by a review team to the Department of Applied Psychology from the 27<sup>th</sup> February to 1<sup>st</sup> March. The Department had prepared a Self-Assessment Report (SAR) in two volumes. The SAR, together with other relevant documentation, was made available to the PRG in advance of our visit to the Department.

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

The timetable for the site visit is attached in *Appendix A*.

The Quality Review office is to be commended on arranging the timetable for the review visit and for the provision of excellent administrative support to the review group. The PRG met a wide range of students, staff and other stakeholders over their two-day visit. However, the Review Group felt that the timetable organised by the Quality Review Office for the visit did not provide adequate time for reflection on and evaluation of the wealth of information generated during our visit.

Two of the most senior members of the Department were absent during the PRG visit. The Review Group was granted a meeting with one of the two senior members of the Department on the morning of the second day of our visit. We had a short trans-atlantic conference call with the other senior member of the Department during the afternoon of the second day of our visit.

### **Methodology**

The PRG carefully reviewed all materials submitted by the department. We interviewed members of the Department, undergraduates, postgraduates, graduates

from former years and other stakeholders (e.g. professional psychologists working in local services). The PRG also met the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, the Subject Librarian, the Secretary & Bursar and Ms. Áine Foley from the Finance Office.

The PRG considered the department under the following headings:

- Department Organisation & Planning
- Teaching & Learning
- Research, Scholarly Activity & External Relations
- Physical Infrastructure.

### **Site Visit**

Meetings were held primarily in the Department's main location at the Enterprise Centre on the Distillery Fields site. The PRG was given a comprehensive tour of the facilities by the Head of the Department, Dr. Sean Hammond. The departmental building on Donovan's Road was not visited.

### **Peer Review Group Report**

The Report was jointly drafted on the second day of the Review visit by the members of the Peer Review Group.

### **Overall Analysis**

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

It was evident to the PRG that a great deal of time and effort had been expended by the Department in producing their two-volume self-assessment report. However, the document would have benefited from a comprehensive executive summary together with clearer details on the following:

- i) the number of students attending modules provided by the Department,
- ii) student FTE's broken down by course,
- iii) grant income per academic per annum,
- iv) research collaborations especially with other leading international universities.

In addition it would have been helpful to the PRG if staff publications had been presented using a clear hierarchical structure with indication for key papers of journal impact factors and/or citation index.

### **SWOT Analysis**

The PRG carefully reviewed and broadly endorsed the departmental SWOT analysis as presented in the Self-Assessment Report. However we wish to draw the department's attention to the following points.

#### ***Strengths***

We endorse the majority of the areas outlined by the department. However there are three contentious claims made by the department.

- “*Success in obtaining high levels of research grants*”. Although relatively high, the PRG felt that there was some scope for improvement in this area in order to attain a truly international profile for the Department.
- “*Good IT support for teaching and research*”. The PRG noted that some members of the academic staff are providing supplementary support in this area. However, the lack of a dedicated IT support technician means that academic staff time in this area is being used inefficiently at the expense of research time.
- “*Good management structures (including devolution) in Department*”. It is clear to the PRG that over the past eighteen months the department has made a concerted effort to improve its management structures. However, based on our observations and meetings with relevant staff, we conclude that there is room for further improvement in this area. From the evidence gathered it appeared to the PRG that there is evidence of tension between two significant groups within the Department and a lack of transparency in the allocation of space, workloads and resources. See later recommendation.

#### ***Weaknesses***

We concur with the issues raised by the department. In particular from our observations we would highlight the need for the department to urgently address the following:

- “Lack of clarity in department strategy “
- “Lack of trust, transparency and consultation in decision-making”
- “Undergraduate students do not see full range of staff”

### ***Opportunities***

We were surprised that the opportunities listed did not include the development of a structured PhD programme.

### ***Threats***

- *“Frequent bureaucratic exercises such as this one and other instant demands of College management“.*

While the QI/QA exercise is clearly not above criticism, the PRG were surprised at the implication in this statement that the QI/QA exercise represents a threat to the Department. We understand however that the phrasing of this statement does not reflect the considered view of the Department. The department primarily wished to highlight the threat posed by the increasing bureaucratic load associated with teaching and research within the university.

### **Benchmarking Exercise**

The PRG found the benchmarking exercise to be informative in highlighting areas of under-provision and apparent inadequacy in the Dept of Applied Psychology, UCC. These include a high staff/student ratio, inadequate technical support, and relatively poor provision of laboratory and computing facilities. With regard to completion rates for undergraduates and post graduates and other outcomes including the proportion of students attaining honours degrees, the Department is performing at a comparable level to the benchmarked institutions. The Department appears to be out-performing its equivalent Department in NUIG based on the number of publications since 2000. However, its publication output lags behind the two UK benchmarking institutions. It is difficult to evaluate the Department’s relative position with respect to research funding because the data presented for the four institutions are based on different time-frames.

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

### **Department Organisation & Planning**

With regard the leadership in the department, the PRG felt that the current acting head is doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances. The PRG commend the appointment and efficiency of the department manager and we were also impressed by the dedication and effectiveness of the administrative staff. We note that in the past year, the Department has established a management group to facilitate organisation and planning. This is a significant and welcome development which will support the Department's on-going work to develop a shared vision and strategy for teaching and research.

The Department is heavily committed to service teaching and it offers a large number of postgraduate courses, some of which are arguably redundant. The average teaching load expected of academic staff is approximately 150 contact hours per year. Many staff in the Department (as in other departments in UCC) have student contact hours well above this number. The PRG is concerned about the uneven distribution of teaching load which was flagged in the Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and confirmed in meetings with staff. In particular, the group was concerned that the more junior members of staff may not have adequate protected time to develop specialist research profiles.

The PRG formed the view that there are too many postgraduate programmes in the Department at the expense of scholarly activity. The PRG are also concerned that an over reliance on postgraduate student FTE's to fund staffing has the potential to distort the overall profile of the Department, with potentially adverse consequences for the Department's research output.

From the documentation available to us, the PRG were unclear as to whether the Department currently has a postgraduate studies committee with the remit of monitoring students' progression from MPhil to PhD degrees as currently required of all Departments in UCC. However we understand that a postgraduate research committee has recently been established.

## **Teaching & Learning**

The Department's undergraduate psychology degree programme has one of the highest CAO entry points in the Arts Faculty. Another main strength of the Department is the positive relationship between staff and students. The high regard in which members of the Department are held by current and former students was clear to members of the PRG. Overall students perceive a good atmosphere in the Department. Specifically, staff are perceived widely as being approachable and supportive. In addition there was evidence of several interesting teaching innovations among the staff (for example, person-centred teaching, and the use of the internet to deliver certain modules). Students commented extremely favourably on tutorials given by staff in the first year psychology programme. The third year students are particularly appreciative of the quality of teaching in statistics which they feels prepares them well for their research projects.

The following issues in relation to undergraduate teaching need to be clarified and or addressed.

1. Evidence was presented to the PRG that student handbooks for each of undergraduate years are not sufficiently comprehensive and up to date.
2. There is a need for greater clarity and consistency regarding procedures for course option signup and transfer mechanisms in Department
3. There were concerns expressed in relation to the timetabling of tutorials/labs with lecture courses
4. Students appear to be unclear about the mark-grade descriptors used in marking essays and examinations. Under Freedom of Information, such data are required to be available to students.
5. There is a need for greater standardisation in feedback in essay/lab reports.
6. There is lack of clarity on the format required for writing up qualitative reports.
7. The students reported inconsistency in "turnaround times" for essays and practicals.
8. The issue of appropriate career guidance for undergraduate students was raised by a significant proportion of current and former students.

The Department should consider putting additional generic material about courses and career options in Psychology on the Departmental web-page.

9. The Department needs to give careful consideration to the possibility of provision or facilitation of work experience for undergraduate students.

### **Postgraduates**

A number of specific issues were raised by post-graduate students.

10. Research students were concerned with lack of basic facilities, e.g. computers, a feeling of isolation from the main campus and very poor library facilities. Specifically, the PRG was told that there is a lack of protected space with appropriate IT facilities for post-graduates. Due to the relatively poor provision of dedicated computers, it seems that post-graduates and under-graduates share the same computer resources. The PRG were informed that this creates problems for post-graduates with regard to both privacy and protection of undisturbed time for work
11. As highlighted above (Department Organisation & Planning), the Department does not appear to have developed a transparent system for progression from MPhil to PhD. It is not clear to PRG that current University policy is being adhered to in this area.
12. It appears that not all post-graduate courses are accredited and the PRG were unclear as to whether there are plans to seek accreditation for all courses from the relevant bodies.
13. The PRG were surprised to learn of the very small number of students on the MA in Counselling Psychology (5 in the first year and 2 in the second year of the programme), as this has implications for usage of resources.



### **Research, Scholarly Activity & External Relations**

The Department has research grant income that is well above average in the Faculty of Arts and has high PhD completion rates. The PRG were also impressed by the ethos of applying Psychology to a range of practical issues and with the success of the Department in acquiring substantial funding from the EU and from Health Boards.

The PRG were concerned with the number of apparently separate research teams in a Department of this size. The PRG formed the impression that the department has an “Individual Research Culture”. While it is clear that all academics have the right to pursue individual and personal research interests, it is also clear that the Department need to make a strategic decision to focus on a small number of core research priorities. Unless this takes place, the ability to compete with larger international research teams will be disadvantaged. The Department should consider developing a research strategy which will enable staff and postgraduates target specific high impact peer reviewed journals. The Department should also consider setting a minimum number of papers to be submitted for publication to peer reviewed journals before the award of higher degrees.

There seems to be no research forum which allows postgraduates and academic staff to meet on a regular basis to discuss and review ongoing research projects and the Department’s publication strategy.

The list of relationships with other universities and international bodies is impressive but nonetheless it is difficult to deduce the depth and specific effects of these relationships in terms of their impact on scholarly activity and research.

### **Physical Infrastructure**

The PRG have concerns about the quality of the building in which the Department is located. The Enterprise Centre building is drab, claustrophobic and urgently in need of major refurbishment. Specifically, we note and endorse the Department’s comments on the inadequate nature of much of the office space (especially the windowless rooms), the limited laboratory facilities and the lack of a restaurant within the building. The lack of adequate laboratory facilities is a major impediment to both

teaching (undergraduate and postgraduate) and research. In this context it is extremely difficult to justify the duplication of the Department's resources on two separate sites.

## **Support Services**

### ***Library***

The PRG met with the Subject Librarian, Mr. Cathal Kerrigan, who provided a detailed and comprehensive account of the Applied Psychology library resources. Mr. Kerrigan acknowledged that there have been significant problems with regard to the availability of books, journals and electronic resources in recent years. However, he indicated that in the current academic year there has been a significant allocation of library resources to the Dept. of Applied Psychology. The Department has an opening balance on its book fund of 13,500euro. He also detailed recent funding developments with regards electronic resources including the Science Foundation of Ireland allocation. The Department now has access to Science Direct, EBSCO and Kluwer Journals Online. These developments represent a significant improvement in access over the past year, which brings the Department to international standard in this area. These resources can be accessed from the Enterprise Centre where the Department is located, although the issue of appropriate provision of computers and IT support within the Department needs to be addressed. The Librarian has also instituted a system which allows the Department purchase (from the general Library fund) core texts, linked to specific modules, before the start of teaching. This should address the difficulties in accessing core texts, currently experienced by undergraduates.

### **Other issues**

- The optimal faculty location for the Department of Applied Psychology was raised with staff and stakeholders in the context of the ongoing discussions on University restructuring. It was suggested by one stakeholder that the Department might consider taking a lead role in the establishment of a School of Behavioural Sciences. Members of the Department expressed a clear preference for maintaining the existing links with the Arts faculty. It was also clear to the PRG that the Department is a valued member of the Faculty of Arts. However it was not clear to the PRG that the Department has carried out

an in-depth, strategic appraisal of its options with regard to the restructuring process.

- The PRG were unclear about the basis upon which clients receive counselling services from full-time staff in UCC. The legal, insurance and financial issues arising from this practice need to be addressed.
- The PRG were also unclear about the systems and structures in place to ensure that all research conducted by staff and students in the Department is considered by an independent research ethics committee. However, we understand that the Department is aware of this issue and will address it with input from the recently established University Research Ethics Committee.
- The PRG noted that a number of staff within the Department are unsure about their contract of employment with the university.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **Recommendations for improvement made by Department**

The PRG endorse the recommendations for improvement made by the department on pages 42-44 of the SAR, volume 1, reproduced in *Appendix B*. However we have some concerns that existing resources available to the department are not optimally deployed. For example, the group notes that the two most senior members of staff are absent from the Department for relatively long periods at the same time.

In particular, we support:

- the need for one additional lecturer, and in line with the SAR, agree that there is a gap in the cognitive/cognitive neuropsychology area. However, such a post requires linkage with existing staff in research interests. The Department also needs to ensure that the Dean is briefed on the technical resources required to support such a post.
- the need for an IT technician/specialist programmer.
- the need for permanency for the temporary Executive Assistant post. (The question of whether the current Executive Assistant posts should be re-graded at Senior Executive Assistant level should also be addressed as a matter of high priority).

- the need for better facilities on the Enterprise Centre site, including improved laboratory facilities linked to teaching and research activity.
- the need to reconsider the commitment to Service teaching (Service teaching should be dropped in the absence of clear funding).
- the need to continue to develop open, transparent procedures in the management of the Department.
- the need to develop support systems for all staff.

The PRG sought clarification on the following recommendation:

*“The University should support the Department in providing the Continuing Professional Development courses which are now required by professional bodies for the maintenance and development of expertise in psychology”*

The actions that should follow from this recommendation were unclear.

From correspondence following the review, we understand that the Department seeks formal recognition by College/Faculty that CPD is a requirement for academics in Applied Psychology and that serious consideration be given to the provision of a CPD budget, along the lines of the research travel budget.

### **Recommendations for improvement made by PRG**

In addition to the endorsement of the recommendations for improvement made by the Department in the SAR and referred to above, the PRG made the following recommendations:

1. That a formal mentoring scheme for junior academics should be put in place.
2. That all staff without a permanent contract be fully appraised (in writing) on their employment contract with the university
3. That a system be developed to ensure a more equitable spread of teaching, and to ensure, in particular, that more junior staff have protected time to develop their research profile.

4. That members of the Department develop a shared research agenda and identify core research priorities.
5. That the Department should consider developing a higher research profile in clinical and health science areas.
6. That the Department establish systems for research management which provide targets and record progress.
7. That Science faculty entry should be reconsidered for undergraduates.
8. That the Department consider the need to rationalise the profile of postgraduate courses, particularly in the light of University policy with respect to the development of self-funding Masters courses rather than Higher Diplomas.
9. In the context of a strategic review of post-graduate teaching, the Department should consider the introduction of a Practitioner Doctorate programme.
10. That the Department should consider developing a research strategy which will enable staff and postgraduates target specific high impact peer reviewed journals. The Department should also consider setting a minimum number of papers to be submitted for publication to peer reviewed journals before the award of higher degrees.
11. That the department focus its activity on a single site in order to ensure coherence.
12. With regard to the wider UCC environment, there is a need for continued critical review of promotional structures. There is a perception that the current promotional procedures do not value teaching. This perception gives rise to considerable stress and frustration among academics.

**Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit**

**Department of Applied Psychology**

***Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> February 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 and Head of Department and  
Departmental Co-ordinating Committee.

***Monday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005***

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group in Room 16 (ground floor), Department of Applied  
Psychology, Enterprise Centre, North Mall
- Consideration of Self-Assessment Report
- 09.00 Dr. Seán Hammond, Head of Department
- 09.30 Meeting with all members of the Department, including some part-time staff
- 10.30 Tea/Coffee
- 10.45 Time allowed for private meetings of members of the Peer Review Group with members  
of staff.
- 10.45 Margaret Murphy/Maura O'Brien
- 11.00 Ronny Swain
- 11.15 Pat O'Donovan
- 11.30 John Horgan
- 11.45 Nicola Barry
- 12.00 John McCarthy
- 12.15 Bozena Cierlik
- 12.30 Maria Dempsey
- 12.45 Jurek Kirakowski
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Visit to core facilities of Department. PRG escorted by Dr. Seán Hammond
- 15.00 Representatives of 1<sup>st</sup> year students

- 15.20     Representatives of 2<sup>nd</sup> year students
- Mary Clifford  
Anna Curtin  
Siobhan Foley  
Eve Griffin  
Catriona Lyng
- 15.40     Representatives of 3<sup>rd</sup> year students
- Richie Morrisroe
- 16.00     Representatives of Postgraduates in taught programmes
- Mary Cannon – representing Higher Diploma in Psychology  
Carmel Grant – representing MA Counselling Psychology  
Julie O’Donoghue – representing MA Counselling Psychology  
Fergal McLoughlin - representing MA Forensic Psychology  
Brenda Nestor - representing Higher Diploma in Guidance & Counselling
- 16.20     Representatives of Postgraduates in research programmes
- Siobhan Lambert - MPhil student  
David Leahy – Mphil student  
Niamh McNamara, - PhD student
- 17.00     Representatives of recent graduates, employers and other stakeholders
- Venue: Room 16 (ground floor), Department of Applied Psychology, Enterprise Centre, North Mall
- Ms. Mary Moore Corry, Suicide Research Foundation  
Mr. Seamus Feehan, Brothers of Charity  
Ms. Maire Griffin, MA Counselling Psychology  
Ms. Anna Hurley, past graduate  
Ms. Roisin Kelleher, past graduate  
Mr. Colum Layton, Inspectorate for Department of Education/past graduate  
Ms. Ann Moloney, Principal Psychologist, Enable Ireland  
Mr. David Quinlan, COPE Foundation  
Mr. David O’Hanlon, past graduate  
Ms. Amanda O’Shea, past graduate
- 19.00     Meeting of Peer Review Group to identify remaining aspects to be clarified and to finalise tasks for the following day followed by a working private dinner for members for the Peer Review Group.

***Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2005***

- 08.45     Convening of Peer Review Group in Tower Room 1, North Wing, Main Quadrangle
- 09.00     Professor David Cox, Dean of Faculty of Arts
- 09.30     Mr. Cathal Kerrigan, Subject Librarian, UCC Library

- 09.45 Consideration of issues by PRG
- 10.30 Ms. Áine Foley, Finance Office
- 10.45 Tea/Coffee
- 11.15 Consideration of issues by PRG
- 11.30 Mr. Michael Kelleher, Secretary & Bursar
- 12.00 Professor Max Taylor, Professor of Applied Psychology
- 12.30 PRG return to Enterprise Centre
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of the Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Preparation of first draft of final report. Finalisation of arrangements for speedy completion and submission of final report.
- 15.00 Conference call with Professor Eleanor O'Leary
- 16.30 Dr. Seán Hammond, Head of Department
- 17.00 Exit presentation made to all staff of the Unit by the Peer Review Group, summarising the principal findings of the Peer Review Group.
- The presentation is not for discussion at this time.
- Venue: Room 16, Department of Applied Psychology, Enterprise Centre, North Mall
- The presentation followed by a reception for staff and members of the PRG.
- 19.00 Externs depart



**Recommendations made by department in the Self Assessment Report**

The following recommendations made by the department are supported by the PRG.

- 1) Given that there is heavy demand for the Department's offerings from a diverse range of students, resources should be made available to support effective delivery of the subject:
  - a. To maintain current commitments, we need one additional lecturer.
  - b. To satisfy accreditation requirements and maintain current commitments, we need at least one additional technician with IT expertise.
  - c. To facilitate the developments discussed in Section 8 (5) we need 3 new lectureships in specialised areas.
  - d. To ensure smooth running and continuity, the temporary Executive Assistant post should be made permanent.
  - e. To maintain and develop teaching and research commitments we need:
    - i. Ten sound-proofed interviewing/skills training rooms;
    - ii. An audio-visual laboratory;
    - iii. An observation laboratory with adjacent stepped classroom and one-way mirror facility;
    - iv. A biosignal laboratory;
    - v. Four dedicated tutorial rooms.
- 2) Given the detrimental (and demoralising) effect of uncertainty about the part-time budget for undergraduate and postgraduate courses (which has been progressively reduced in recent years), the University should (i) protect this budget and (ii) communicate details of funding to the Department by the January preceding the academic year.
- 3) In tandem with recommendation 7 (below), a Departmental Accounting Technician should be appointed, following the model of the most successful University Research Centres in UCC and elsewhere.
- 4) To prevent waste of resources through duplication of lectures to large classes, the University should provide a large lecture theatre (to hold up to 800 students).

- 5) The University should respect and facilitate any departmental decision to change existing postgraduate courses to a self-funding basis.
- 6) The University should develop appropriate career paths for part time academic, part time professional and support staff.
- 7) The University should streamline procedures for supporting the development and tendering of proposals for external funding.
- 8) The University should support the Department in providing the Continuing Professional Development courses which are now required by professional bodies for the maintenance and development of expertise in psychology.
- 9) Because the Enterprise Centre is a satellite location, the University should provide:
  - a. proper cafeteria facilities, restrooms and library support for undergraduate and postgraduate students and staff..
  - b. parking facilities which are urgently required for part-time staff and students, including consideration of a north-side park-and-ride service.
- 10) Given the burden of Quality Review in terms of person hours, the University should streamline and lighten the process in inverse proportion with other demands of academic life, which continue to increase.
- 12) Failing receipt of appropriate resources, the Department must seriously reconsider its commitment to service teaching.
- 13) The Department should develop information systems and performance indicators that reflect the diverse nature of applied psychology.
- 14) The Department should provide internal mentoring and peer support structures for all staff.
- 15) The Department should maintain the momentum of organisational change and continue to develop procedures which are open and transparent.