

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

**Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance**

**Peer Review Group Report**

**Department of English**

**Academic Year 2001/2**

## **Members of Peer Review Group**

Professor Breandán Ó Conchúir, Modern Irish Department, UCC (Chair)

Professor Gearóid Ó Cruaí, Roinn an Bhéaloídis, UCC

Professor Mary Clayton, Department of English, University College Dublin

Mr. Bernard O' Donoghue, Department of English, Wadham College, University of Oxford, UK.

## **Timetable of Site Visit**

The site visit was conducted over two days from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2002.

### *Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> February*

- 18.00 – 19.30    First meeting of members of Peer Review Group  
                    Briefing by Director of Quality Promotion Unit
- 20.00             Dinner for Peer Review Group, Head of Department and  
                    Departmental Coordinating Committee

### *Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> February*

- 08.30 – 09.00    Convening of Peer Review Group in Department
- 09.00 – 10.00    Meeting with Head of Department
- 10.00 – 13.00    Meetings with individual members of staff
- 13.00 – 13.45    Working lunch for Peer Review Group
- 13.45 – 14.00    Meeting with Ms Louise Tobin, Head, International Education Office
- 14.00 – 14.30    Meeting with Professor Brian Harvey, Vice-President for Research  
                    Policy & Support
- 14.30 – 15.00    Meeting with Professor Áine Hyland, Vice-President
- 15.00 – 15.30    Meeting with Professor Peter Woodman, Dean of Arts
- 15.30 – 18.00    Meetings with representatives of students
- 18.30             Meeting and working dinner for Peer Review Group

### *Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> February*

- 08.30 – 09.30    Meetings with individual members of staff

- 09.30 – 10.30 Visit to Q+3, Boole Library. Meeting with Subject Librarian, Ms. Olivia Fitzpatrick
- 10.30 – 11.00 Meeting with Denis O’ Sullivan, Head of Systems & Networking Operations, Computer Centre
- 11.00 – 12.00 Meetings with individual members of staff
- 12.00 – 13.00 Meeting with Professor Colbert Kearney, Head of Department
- 13.00 – 13.40 Working lunch for Peer Review Group
- 13.40 – 14.00 Meeting with Professor Sebastian Green, Dean of Commerce
- 14.00 – 17.00 Preparation of first draft of final report
- 17.00 – 17.30 Exit presentation to staff of Department, Room 124, O’Rahilly Building
- 19.00 Working dinner for Peer Review Group

## **Drafting of Peer Review Report**

*Areas of primary responsibility of members in preparation of first draft*

Research & Scholarly Standing; External Relations :

Professor Clayton,  
Mr. O’ Donoghue

Teaching and Learning; Departmental Coordinating Committee:

Professor Ó Crualaoich

Other areas :

Professor Ó Conchúir

## **General Comment of Peer Review Group**

The Department of English is hugely successful. It not only meets but well exceeds the normal criteria for determining success in such a department – student numbers (and most significantly high retention rates), quality of teaching, research and scholarly profile, and postgraduate scholarships. It can justifiably claim to be the benchmark against which other departments might measure themselves.

## **Detailed Findings of Peer Review Group**

### *Staff and Physical Facilities of Department*

The gender profile among staff is reasonably balanced (though it does not, understandably, mirror the gender profile of the students) and there is a satisfactory age profile.

There is understandable concern in the Department at the non-tenured status of its three full-time senior tutors. This is all the more indefensible when one considers the qualifications, length of service, heavy workload and central role of these members in the work of the Department.

The Department's staff-student ratio is unacceptably high. This prevents it from further development in certain areas of the curriculum, and from movement towards smaller classes.

While the move to the O' Rahilly Building has improved office space, the resultant loss of two dedicated tutorial rooms has meant a lack of tutorial teaching space. A good deal of time is spent by administrative and teaching staff in solving this problem. The lack of an adequate postgraduate room has impoverished the student experience, especially that of the research students.

### *Departmental Organisation and Planning*

The Department is managed with the help of a well-devised committee structure, allowing staff participate in decision-making, and encouraging good internal relations.

The administrative staff deserve high praise for their key contribution to the work of the Department and for the good working relationship built up with the teaching staff.

The Department has very high student numbers, and while its staff-student committee works well, class representatives can only give limited insights into student needs and into student response to a department. Additional ways of getting student feedback might be considered.

In a department with heavy administrative loads, and where there is disparity in class sizes and uneven distribution of postgraduate students' research interests, imbalances in workloads can easily creep in. This issue needs to be addressed.

### *Teaching and Learning*

Based on the submissions made to us – on paper and orally – by both staff and students, we are agreed that teaching and learning in the Department manages to be both solid and effective while also being creative and imaginatively rewarding. We were very impressed at how this quality of teaching and learning is regularly achieved, in the case of both students and teachers, despite a very adverse staff-student ratio and the drawbacks of frequently overlarge class size and the volumes of correction and marking this involves. We were particularly aware of the crucial role that the senior tutors and the administrative staff have in making this achievement possible.

We feel that the admirable openness and flexibility of the Departmental syllabus that is espoused by all staff members brings with it a certain vulnerability to allowing gaps to arise, inadvertently, in respect of some aspects of the coverage of the Department's subject field. An over-reliance on staff specialization and student choice in this regard could, in time, detract from the excellence of the learning experience that pertains at present.

We were impressed by the general willingness and, in large part, enthusiasm of lecturers and tutors to benefit from sharing information and experience in regard to teaching style and methods of assessment. Also impressive was the general commitment to embrace and benefit from a serious engagement with IT resources and with new technologies of course delivery and student learning.

### *Research and Scholarly Standing*

The English Department in UCC is recognized, both nationally and internationally, as an excellent and vibrant one, with a membership which is highly productive in both scholarly and creative fields. On all objective measurements, the Department has done extremely well. A member of the Department has won the Faculty of Arts research prize and a Government of Ireland Fellowship in two of the past four years, while another member has also won the Faculty research prize. The Department's postgraduates have had the highest success rate in the Faculty in the Government of Ireland postgraduate scholarships and have also been successful in the Arts Faculty Postgraduate Scholarship. Members of the Department have been similarly successful in gaining funding for such projects as the Munster Women Writers, different strands of the Documents of Ireland, the Transmission and Transformation of the Ancient World, Medieval Irish Inscribed Monuments and High Crosses (all PRTLTI-funded projects), the Early Christian Inscribed Stones of Munster and in gaining Arts Council grants from the Arts Councils of both Ireland and England. The full documentation in the Self-Assessment Report bears out the Department's distinction in books, articles and performance.

### *External Relations*

The Department has a wide range of links with other departments in UCC through its contribution to many undergraduate and postgraduate interdepartmental programmes (and through courses taught by it in other departments and in the Faculty of Commerce). It has made a particular contribution to the development and

management of Drama and Theatre Studies. It also has staff-involvement in PRTL-funded projects, both interdepartmental and inter-university.

Members of the Department have contributed significantly to the development of the University by serving on many committees and university boards.

The Department has been very active in organizing conferences in UCC.

It has strong connections, locally, nationally and internationally, to professional theatre and performance and members of the department have made very significant contributions in this area, both in terms of practice and organization.

The Department has a strong sense of duty towards the university's social and civic environment, a duty that some members of the department would like to develop even further. Its participation in UCC Adult Education courses, its public lecture series and its proposal for an outreach degree are all very much to be commended.

English Department staff have been invited lecturers and visiting professors throughout these islands, in many European countries, in North America, Australia and Africa. They have acted as external examiners in Trinity College Dublin, the University of Limerick, King's College, London, Liverpool, Westminster, Cambridge and Hong Kong, as assessors for the Government of Ireland Scholarships and as external assessors for university appointments throughout Ireland. A considerable number of them act as readers for periodicals and for academic publishers.

The hundreds of visiting students annually constitute the main type of exchange (strictly speaking, it is more of a one-way traffic, as very few of the Department's students go abroad).

#### *Support Services*

Parking arrangements and cleaning services appear to have fared worst in staff's rating of the various college services.

#### *Library Services*

Library staff whom we spoke to were enthusiastic and most anxious to meet students' needs in whatever way they could. The importance of regular communication between the library and representatives of students and staff was stressed. The Department for its part found the library services wanting in the following areas :

A general shortage of books, especially of popular monographs; not enough study places for students; insufficient provision of computer applications.

#### *Work of Departmental Coordinating Committee in preparation of Self-assessment Report and Swot Analysis*

The Peer Review Group are aware of the logistical difficulties that faced the Coordinating Committee of such a large and varied Department and recognise the very considerable work that went into the preparation of the Report and the Analysis.

The Report as presented would have benefited from further editing and attention to lay-out, for instance in the matter of a Contents List, the provision of a unified system of pagination and the excision of extraneous pages such as ERIN cover-sheets. Overall, the Report was a somewhat difficult document to peruse.

Questions arise as to the adequacy of the efforts made to obtain satisfactory response levels to the various categories of Questionnaire used and the adaptation of specimen Questionnaires to the specific circumstances of the Department's work. A change of Headship of the Department at the start of the current academic session may have unwittingly contributed to the overall impression the Report gives of a certain lack of sustained urgency in the execution of the self-assessment exercise. We felt that the report would have benefited from being edited by an academic member of the Department.

The Analysis shows some signs of having been produced at haste and in a manner over-reliant on generalisation. Nevertheless, the Analysis is congruent, in large part, with the findings of the Review Group, as can be seen in terms of Actions and Recommendations.

The work of the Coordinating Committee in many ways reflects the pressures of an overworked but successful department. The Committee should be commended for its work.

## **Recommendations of Peer Review Group**

- Noting the failure of one of the senior tutors to get a response of any kind from Human Resources on the question of contracts, the issue should be taken up urgently by the Head of Department with Human Resources with a view to finding a satisfactory solution.
- An additional two full-time lecturing staff, as suggested in the Department's submission, would not only bring about improvement in the staff-student ratio but would also be a fitting reward for excellence.
- A representative of the Department should meet with a representative of Room Bookings Office to discuss how best to provide for the tutorial teaching needs of the Department.
- The Department might further explore ways of giving its research students a greater sense of belonging.

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- While the Departmental committees work well, generally, there should be a strengthening of the reporting process, particularly in the area of budgeting.
  - The Department, in consultation with the President, might consider how it could further utilise the wealth of talent and energies of its staff, as for instance by extending the rotating headship to include other qualified staff members. The

two year term of office of Head, while it has operated smoothly, might, with advantage, be extended to three years.

- In addition to the staff-student committees regular questionnaires to improve student feedback might be considered.
- We suggest that the Department comes up with an agreed system of assessing workloads, with a view to equalising them, which will take all teaching into account (whether interdisciplinary or teaching in the Department) along with assessment and administration responsibility. The Department has already begun to address the issue.
- The introduction of the new interdisciplinary Drama and Theatre Studies course in 2001-2002 has caused concerns in the Department. The Peer Review Group feels interdisciplinary programmes are very worthwhile and suggests that the issues relating to Drama and Theatre Studies be further discussed in the Department with a view to finding an agreed policy in the context of all interdisciplinary programmes. College needs to address fully the question of resourcing interdisciplinary programmes.

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- The Department should consciously identify its teaching strengths and plan to move deliberately in those directions. Anglo-Irish literature and Creative Writing would appear to be areas worth considering in this regard, in addition to others that are, at present, prominent.
- Attention should be given to a possible rebalancing of second and third year student options given the impression of over-constriction in second year and over-provision in third year, at present.
- Third year provision of a theory/ideology module, or part-module, to be taken by all students.
- There should be some specific degree of advice and mentoring provided to second and third year students in regard to the quality and consequences of particular option combinations within the degree pathway.
- In order to promote more small-group teaching it is recommended that arrangements be put in place to involve all staff in actual tutoring in years one and two, in addition to year three as at present.
- There should be more direct and sustained involvement of lecturers in the training and supervision of postgraduate tutors.
- Attention should be given to the possibility of organising occasional Departmental Teaching Portfolio sessions to facilitate the widespread desire of staff themselves to learn in the area of pedagogy.

- The possibility of additional lecturing to Taught MA students in the subject content of their specializations should be explored, since the present lecturing provision in this respect is to be considered as minimal.
  - The Department should identify a room to be devoted to open-access computers for students and an application for the provision of a significant number of such computers should be made to the Computer Bureau forthwith.
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- We feel strongly that all of the Department's achievements in the area of research and scholarship should be celebrated and that the College should acknowledge the remarkable contribution to the performing arts made by members of the Department. In the light of this, we feel that the university should formulate a way of counting practice alongside publication for such purposes as promotion.
- The Department's achievements are all the more impressive given the terrible staff-student ratio and the unsatisfactory arrangements for sabbaticals. The arrangements put in place by the Department for a rota of study leave, while clearly better than nothing, are not sufficient to replace a satisfactory sabbatical system. We recommend that the University should consider the introduction of such a system.
- We feel that the Department has a clear but perhaps unacknowledged strength in the area of Anglo-Irish literature, a strength that could be further realized. The Department might consider whether the proposal for a shared UCC/UCG Irish Studies initiative might provide opportunities for further development in this area.
- As a footnote to the earlier observations about senior tutors, we feel that their teaching and administrative loads should not be so heavy as to exclude time for research.
- We feel that the University should recognize and support the Department's outreach initiatives (such as the proposal for an outreach degree and its public lecture series).