

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

Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Department of Modern Irish

Academic Year 2003/04

6th April 2004

Members of the Peer Review Group:

1. Dr. Grace Neville, Department of French, UCC (Chair)
2. Professor Colbert Kearney, Department of English, UCC
3. Professor Ruairi O hUiginn, Roinn na Nua-Ghaeilge, NUI Maynooth, Ireland
4. Professor Ken Nilsen, Department of Celtic, Saint Francis-Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada

Timetable of the site visit

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

The Self-Assessment Report was sent to members of the Peer Group a number of weeks before the site visit giving them the opportunity to read it in detail before the visit.

The Peer Group assembled for the first time on Sunday 22nd February 2004 at 19.00 in the Kingsley Hotel. The Director of the QPU outlined the purpose of the exercise to the members of the group and discussed the schedule for the following days. Some additional documentation which had not been included in the Self-Assessment Report was made available at the meeting. Following a general discussion among members of the group about matters arising from the Self-Assessment Report, they met members of the Department for Dinner.

The PRG met at 8.30 on 23rd February, considered matters arising out of the SAR and went through the day's schedule. A number of areas in need of clarification was identified. At 9.00 the group met the Head of Department and discussed these issues with him in a frank and open manner. Thereafter followed an open meeting with all members of the Department in which these and some other matters were discussed. Following further informal discussion during a coffee break, the PRG met all members of staff (academic and secretarial) individually, and discussed many aspects of the Department

and its work with them. The PRG had the opportunity of taking stock of the morning's discussions over lunch.

The afternoon session was devoted to visiting the core facilities of the department and to meeting with students. The first group comprised a representative selection of undergraduates, drawn from the three undergraduate years and from the evening class. This group also had representatives from special designated courses, the BCL with Irish and the B.Comm. with Irish. The student group raised a number of issues they felt to be of importance. Some of these issues related to courses in general, others were course/year specific. A meeting with a cohort of postgraduate students followed. Other issues were raised and discussed with them.

The third group the PRG met with were graduates and employers. Some 30 people attended the meeting ranging from recent to long-standing graduates, and a number of employers, both within the general areas of Irish-language studies, and some people from without this group. Perceptions of the courses offered by the Department, the value of these courses to graduates, the standing of graduates in the workforce and the requirements of potential employers were among the issues discussed with this group. It was also possible to discuss the academic formation of potential students at second level with educationalists in the group, this being an issue raised by the staff body earlier in the day.

On concluding this meeting the PRG discussed matters raised during the day, over and after dinner, the meeting concluding at 23.00.

The second day commenced with a meeting at 08.30 to discuss the work of this day and issues rising out of meetings with academic staff and students that might be aired with the University's administrative officers. The meetings were useful and informative, as was the visit to the Boole Library. Some queries that had arisen the previous day were addressed and explored with various administrative officers. The formal proceedings

concluded with a meeting with the Head of Department that also served to clear any areas of doubt that arose in the PRG's meetings with students and administrators.

In the afternoon the PRG began drafting the report, and the outline notes for this draft were used in making the exit presentation to Roinn Na Nua-Gaeilge at 5.00. Work continued thereafter on the drafting of the report.

While quite intense, the PRG found that the timetable was well-structured and allowed members to meet and discuss issues with the relevant stakeholders. It was appropriate that the timetable commenced and concluded with a meeting with the HOD, as this allowed the group to clarify certain matters that had been raised over the two days in discussions with different groups.

Peer Review

The PRG found that the site visit was marked by frank, open and helpful discussion with all parties it met. There was a general willingness to embrace the process in a positive manner and to make it work to the advantage of the department. The PRG found it particularly gratifying that so many graduates and employers were willing to come to the University (some from quite far afield) and to give so generously of their time in the interests of the Department.

Following the final meeting, the PRG went through the stages of the visit and compiled notes for the purposes of the exit report. These notes formed the framework of the PRGR. Following the site visit, the notes were subsequently fleshed out and circulated by means of e-mail among the members. The document was added to, revised and edited and the final version of the report was agreed on by all members of the group.

Overall Analysis

The Self-Assessment Report was concise, lucid and to the point. Most of the issues the department was required to address are dealt with therein. The question of benchmarking which was not covered in the SAR, was addressed comprehensively in a subsequent document submitted to the group.

The SWOT analysis focused attention on areas of importance to Roinn na Nua-Gaeilge (RNG). The PRG would concur with the findings of the analysis. Many of the weaknesses identified are weaknesses shared with all university departments; others are shared with other Irish or language departments. Following the site visit, the PRG felt that RNG has other strengths which perhaps are not identified as such in the SAR, but were repeatedly emphasized by the various stakeholders interviewed. Chief among these would be the high standards sought by RNG and the consistently friendly and democratic atmosphere that obtains in the department. This strength, however, is impaired somewhat by a potential weakness: not all university officers are aware of the high standing nationally and internationally of the department and how much it can contribute to the goals set out in the University's mission statement.

The benchmarking exercise is apposite and to the point. Recognising that Ireland provides the main academic leadership in the study of Modern Irish, it points out the difficulties found in attempting such an exercise and the pointlessness of trying to compare departments who have developed expertise in different areas of a large field. While acknowledging the validity of this argument, the PRG would like to point out the fact that RNG has probably the largest undergraduate student cohort within the NUI system and a postgraduate cohort that compares favourably with most others.

Findings

Departmental Details, organisation and planning:

The PRG has found that RNG is a well-organised, welcoming collegial department that has managed to maintain extremely high standards in teaching and research. The welcoming and cordial atmosphere that obtains in the department does not detract from the efficiency with which it is run and the understanding that all members have of the role they have in the department and their individual responsibilities. Student representatives, employers and graduates were at one in their high praise and respect for the department, in what they attempt to achieve and in how they treat students. The postgraduate representatives were particularly laudatory, emphasizing the unfailing generosity of their supervisors with their learning and their time. All students praised the administrative staff of the department, underlining their unfailing efficiency and cordiality.

Teaching and Learning

Most undergraduate and postgraduate students had high praise for the standard of teaching in the department. Embracing the positive spirit of the exercise, some representatives made suggestions for improvement in certain areas. Such suggestions related to course organisation and content and have been conveyed to the Head of Department.

Several members of staff, however, noted the difficulties in dealing with weaker students within a common curriculum (now that the honours/general distinction has been abolished). In attempting to cater for students whose linguistic background is weak, several members of RNG felt that the department may be setting better students at a disadvantage. This is a problem faced by other departments in all Irish universities.

While the department offers excellent courses in traditional core areas, it has shown itself to be willing to embrace innovation. The BCL and B.Comm. with Irish are two such

examples of this. These courses have attracted high-quality students to RNG, but demand a great amount of extra work from staff. The course in Heritage Management was also such an innovation. That it was abolished - for whatever reason - without discussion with members of the department was deeply disappointing to them and does not help morale.

Research

The research carried out and published by members of RNG is of the highest standard. Many important publications have appeared in each of the four main areas mentioned in the SAR, and they are acknowledged experts and indeed leaders in some of these areas. The scholarly interest of staff has informed and inspired the postgraduate programme. Several postgraduates have carried out research in these fields and their published research findings have and will continue to add to the standing of the Department.

External Relations

RNG has developed beneficial relationships with employers and with Gaeltacht communities. The BCL and B.Comm. with Irish have brought the department into close contact with other sectors of the university and through student work placements with the wider community of employers. Employers commented on the quality of the students that had been on placement with them and how positive an image they gave of UCC. The contacts that have been developed with Gaeltacht communities are of particular importance.

Support Services

The PRG found varied levels of satisfaction with the service areas in the University. Detailed questionnaires containing this information were provided in the SAR. The PRG had the opportunity to speak with the Library staff and to discuss aspects of relations with RNG, but was disappointed that the Director of Human Resources was unable to meet with them.

Departmental Co-ordinating Committee and methodology employed in SAR.

All members of RNG participated in writing the document which adhered to the guidelines set and to which all members of staff contributed.

Recommendations for Improvement

The PRG endorses the recommendations made by the department in the SAR.

- A. Clear lines of demarcation should be made and maintained between RNG and the Department of Early and Medieval Irish. While both departments can work closely together, their traditions and medium of instruction are quite different as are a considerable number of the students each department attracts. While it may be convenient to continue with the present arrangement of shared secretarial support and other facilities – given that they share the same part of the O’Rahilly Building – it is vital that matters such as budget, status as cost centres etc. be kept quite separate.
- B. With regard to space, an additional postgraduate room is an urgent need. As it is, the room currently in use is overcrowded, serves students from two departments, and was the main issue raised by the postgraduates who met with the PRG. It is regrettable for many reasons that students sometimes have to work at home due to lack of space in the Department. Computer equipment in this room is minimal: a new printer is urgently needed.
- C. Staffing levels are a just cause of concern. Given the stated intention of two senior members of staff to retire within the next number of years, it is imperative that they be replaced immediately.
- D. The transfer of the College Language Teacher to the Department is welcomed.

- E. The initiatives suggested by RNG deserve full consideration. Any courses that would attract postgraduate students from overseas would enhance the standing both of the subject areas and of UCC.

Following the site visit the PRG would make the following further recommendations:

1. It is unfortunate that not all college Officers are aware of the high standing of RNG, both nationally and internationally. For its part, the department might try to remedy this somewhat by maintaining a higher profile within UCC in terms of greater publicity for its achievements. The possibility of holding regular and widely publicised seminars (perhaps through the medium of English), which would attract academics from other departments, could be explored. In this context, too, given the centrality of the Department in the development of numerous areas of research and creative writing at national and international level a short history of the Department could be included on the Departmental web site.
2. The department might look at the possibility of having greater co-ordination in its language syllabus. If not already in place, a system to ensure greater harmonization of marks for written work awarded by tutors might be introduced, and more regular meetings of language teaching staff (including an induction course for new language tutors) could be helpful. In language classes, consideration might be given to widening and varying the range of text types used, through the incorporation of more non-literary texts.

Given the problems brought about by differing standards achieved at second level, RNG might further investigate the possibility of establishing greater links with second-level teachers and with the UCC Department of Education to inform themselves of standards and developments in this sector, and to use such information in syllabus development particularly in First Year. Greater

cooperation could also be envisaged with other colleagues involved in language teaching (often teaching the same students) elsewhere in the university, who face similar problems. Consideration might also be given to greater involvement with the range of teaching and learning initiatives currently available in UCC at which issues such as these are regularly addressed.

3. The present staffing level is the minimum that could be countenanced if the high standards obtaining in RNG are to be maintained. Given the fact that only one member of staff specialises in contemporary literature – an area in which RNG has had a prestigious tradition – the University should look to strengthening this through filling the Literature Chair left vacant since the retirement of Professor Seán Ó Tuama in 1991. Numerous exciting possibilities of interdisciplinary work with other departments, e.g. in areas such as ethnomusicality, religion and folklore, that could attract students nationally and internationally, could not be envisaged without serious consideration being given to the whole question of staffing levels.
4. The University should give serious consideration to establishing a centre for academic writing to service all sectors of the university. This would serve to introduce students to basic essay-writing skills, grammatical usage, etc. It would appear that work of this nature is being replicated in various departments throughout the university.
5. Consideration should be given to acknowledging the fact that the excellent work of the administrative colleagues on the Department is carried out in two languages.

Timetable for conduct of Peer Review Visit

Roinn na Nua-Ghaeilge

Sunday 22nd February 2004

- 18.00 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 were exchanged and areas to be clarified or explored are identified.
- 20.00 Dinner for members of the Peer Review Group and members of the Department

Monday 23rd February 2004

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group
- Consideration of Self-Assessment Report
- 09.00 Professor Seán Ó Coileáin, Head of Department
- 09.30 Meeting with all staff of Department
- 10.30 Tea / coffee for PRG + all staff
- Meetings with individual members of staff
- 11.00 Seán Ua Súilleabháin
11.15 Liam P. Ó Murchú
11.30 Pádraigín Riggs
11.45 Breandán Ó Conchúir
12.00 Aodán Ó Dúill
12.15 Máiréad Ní Loingsigh
12.30 Niall Buttimer
12.45 Maude Vernon
13.00 Siobhán Ní Dhonghaile
- 13.15 Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Visit to core facilities of Department, escorted by Professor S. Ó Coileáin
- Meetings with representative selections of students and researchers
- 15.00 Undergraduate Students

1ú Bliain

Caroline Ní Bhronáin Uí Chonchúir

Ciarán Ó Gealbháin

2ú Bliain

Brenda Ní Ghairbhí

Sinéad O'Donoghue

Máire Ní Chonghaile

3ú Bliain

Sinéad Ní Chonchúir

Audrey Finn

Brian Ó Srianáin

Paula Sheehan

Rang na hOíche

Tomás Ó Briain

15.55 Postgraduate Students

Mic-léinn iarchéime

Deirdre Nic Mhathúna

Frank Milling

Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe

Gearóidín Nic Chárthaigh

Máire Ní Ící

Gearóidín de Buitléir

16.30 Researchers

Bláthnaid Uí Chatháin

17.00 Meetings with representative selections of recent graduates, employers and other stakeholders as appropriate

Recent Graduates

Seán Ó Laoi

Treasa Ní Eachtigheirn

Tomás Ó Muiríosa

Brian Ó Donnchadha

Síle Ní Chochláin

Helen Ní Chatháin

Finín Ó Drisceoil

Éanna Ó Loingsigh

Eibhlín Ní Luinneacháin

(BA 1999-2000)

James Martin Barry

(BA 2000-1)

Gráinne Connolly

Employers

Pádraig Hamilton

Cáit Bhreathnach

Éamonn Lankford

Seán Ó Broin
Diarmaid Ó Catháin
Liam Suipéal

Other Stakeholders

Donnchadha Ó hAodha

- 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 24th February 2004

- 08.30 Convening of Peer Review Group
- 09.00 Professor Aidan Moran, Registrar & Vice-President for Academic Affairs
- 09.30 Visit to Q+3 and Q-1, Boole Library, meeting with Ms. Margot Conrick, Head of Information Services and Ms. Olivia Fitzpatrick & Ms. Helen Davis, Subject Librarians
- 10.30 Ms. Carmel Cotter, Finance Office
- 10.45 Ms. Marita Foster, International Education Office
- 11.30 Professor David Cox, Dean of Faculty of Arts
- 12.00 Professor Kevin Collins, Vice-President for Research Policy & Support
- 12.30 Professor Seán Ó Coileáin, Head of Department
- 13.00 Working private lunch for members of Peer Review Group
- 14.00 Preparation of first draft of final report
- 17.00 Exit presentation made to all staff of the Department by Professor O hUiginn, 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.

Wednesday 25th February 2004

Externs depart

