

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

Quality Improvement/Quality Assurance

Peer Review Group Report

Department of Sociology

Academic Year 2000/2001

Members of the Peer Review Group

- 1. Professor John Jackson, Professor Emeritus of Sociology, Trinity College, Dublin**
- 2. Professor John Eldridge, Professor of Sociology, University of Glasgow**
- 3. Professor Keith Sidwell, Professor of Latin and Greek, NUI Cork (Chair)**
- 4. Professor Patricia Coughlan, Department of English, NUI Cork**

Timetable of the site visit

Comment on the suitability and adequacy of the timetable.

The Group made substantial changes to the proposed timetable, in particular because of our decision to interview all Department personnel individually. The Group felt that great benefit was derived from this. We recommend that it be made a standard part of the Quality Improvement procedure. Additionally, a scheduled discussion with the head of Department should be included on the second day.

Peer Review

Methodology

List areas of primary responsibility of each member of the Peer Review Group.

From the beginning, this was a shared, collaborative process, and the members of the Group take collective responsibility for the document.

How was the report put together?

The Group carefully read the material provided, met the staff of the Department, academic (full-time, part-time and research) and administrative, and also representatives of undergraduates, 1st, 2nd and 3rd year, and postgraduate students at M.A. and Ph.D. level, many of whom also act as tutors. We also met the Vice-President for Research, the Dean of Arts, the Social Science librarian and the Head of Information Services in the Library, and Professor Áine Hyland, Vice-President. We also inspected the various buildings in which the Department is housed and where some of its teaching is carried out. We then jointly drafted a preliminary report, and gave an oral presentation, based on it, to the Sociology Department. The agreed final report was written thereafter.

Self-Assessment Report

Production of the report and desirable ancillary material

We had a sense, which was confirmed in the discussion with Department members, that the Report was too hastily put together. This led to a lack of editing and a certain amount of repetition. The lack of pagination made the use of the report unnecessarily difficult, and the formatting could have been improved, perhaps by colour coding, and certainly by standardization of the printed material. The presentation of staff *c.v.s* was done in a non-standardized way: some editorial decisions should have been made about what was to be included and how the information was to be presented. We also felt that important contextual information should have been provided: for instance the Strategic Development plan at its three levels, copies of examination papers and Externs' reports. It would also have been very helpful, especially for the externals, to have an account of the history of the Department. For example, how does Sociology relate to its near neighbour, Applied Social Studies?

Findings of the Peer Review Group

Comment, as appropriate, on the details of the Self-Assessment Report.

Department Details

The report excludes important information: in particular, there is a less than full account of Department personnel and of its activities relating to service and other teaching for college courses both inside and outside the Department. The considerable contribution of part-time staff to both teaching and administration is not fully documented.

Department Organisation and Planning

- The Group was very impressed by the high intellectual quality, enthusiasm and commitment of all the Department academic personnel whom it interviewed. Professor Arpad Szokolczai is a scholar of the highest international standing. In research he leads the Department by example.
- There is, however, strong and abundant evidence that non-tenured staff do not feel part of the system. On p. 4 of the Report it is stated that "a part-time status can only be granted to those who already possess a Ph.D., while Department meetings, unless devoted specifically to issues of current teaching, should be attended by full-time staff only". The Group unanimously disagrees. The exclusion of non-tenured staff from meetings is a practice which is experienced by a large majority both of the tenured and of the non-tenured staff as alienating and over-hierarchical. It is widely perceived within the Department as producing a sense of invisibility among non-tenured staff, and we observed a tendency to obscure the extensive contributions made by the labour of such staff to the Department's overall work. Convening meetings which include all staff (with the obvious exception of 1st-year postgraduates acting as 1st-year tutors) will be a vote of confidence in their considerable abilities and dedication. The option of starring, or nominating some items as "reserved business", offers a perfectly acceptable way of handling any sensitive issues. Full and open communication both in advance and subsequent to meetings, and circulation of full minutes (with the exception of any reserved business) are good contemporary practice and should also be adopted.

- It was evident to the Group that staff not in possession of the Ph.D. make a significant contribution to Departmental lecturing and teaching, and there is no good reason to exclude them from the processes of Departmental discussion and decision-making. Conversely, the Group felt that teaching, tutorial administration, and assessment of students' work needs fuller input from tenured and senior staff than it currently receives in this Department.
- The Department's organization was a micro-example of the core-periphery concept: the part-time staff were on the periphery, more insecure and relatively powerless. Although not exclusively a gendered distinction, this organizational pattern impinged more on women than on men, since they constituted the majority of the periphery and were scarcely represented at the core.
- The Department's teaching in other Departments and faculties and non-tenured staff members' active and impressive participation in this, sometimes including the design of such modules, is currently underplayed and possibly undervalued.
- There has been a general problem in UCC about delayed completion of research degrees, but the solution to this problem should be de-coupled from the issue of part-time teaching. The work of those who contribute lecturing and teaching to the Department needs to be seen and valued in its own right, and such people need to be treated *as* teachers. In some cases this may always be their primary activity; the character, traditions and context of this university must be taken into account.

Department Aims and Objectives

- We appreciate that the Department is ambitious to pursue the highest quality in terms of its research product, and this includes the training of Ph.D. students. We would wish, however, that the culture of the Department take more account of the wide range of other activities appropriate and necessary in this university and its potential contributions to the region.

- While the creation of an excellent postgraduate programme is an appropriate aspiration, it should not be developed in such a way that it excludes some members of the Department, especially those strongly involved in teaching (including teaching in ancillary areas), some members of staff and the majority of the undergraduate students
- The Department should more highly value its contributions, actual and potential, in areas outside its own boundaries.
- It should more actively engage in the ongoing development of interdisciplinary subject areas.
- The Sociology Department deals with a very large number of students; it was surprising to us that the Report did not especially focus on this, given the obvious resource implications (staff and other).
- Sociology needs to be more active in applying for IT facilities, such as have been targeted for other Departments in the general area of the social sciences.

Teaching and Learning

- There was patent student enthusiasm about the stimulating nature of their courses, at U/G and P/G level. This is clearly a Department whose actual educational practice is excellent.
- A research methods course must combine teaching in both qualitative and quantitative methods of work. To this end IT training is crucial and an adequate resource base must be provided. In a competitive environment graduates will need to be well equipped with a full range of research skills.
- The Group felt that Sociology students would benefit from a closer acquaintance with the disciplines of Economics and Political Science. This would be helpful in ensuring that they had a capacity to read material in these areas and relate it to their sociological studies. It should be noted that it is the usual pattern in most other programmes in Irish universities for introductory courses in Economics, Politics and Statistics to be provided. It is appreciated that the Faculty structure and programme limit the freedom of the department to influence this situation, but consideration might be given to its implications in relation to the programme as a whole.
- M.A. students expressed a wish for a more structured arrangement about their choice of thesis topic, including a firm set of deadlines for this process. They also felt the scheduling of due dates for seminar essays could be improved by being staggered.
- The Group felt that the 1st-year course could perhaps be improved by more attention to the beginners' status of the students, especially since a new vocabulary and new conceptual frameworks not previously met in the school syllabus must be encountered.
- It would be beneficial if fuller staff-student liaison arrangements were developed: the Group would recommend that each year group should be seen separately, that minutes be taken and that they be circulated to all parties, including the student representatives. All staff who lecture to the

year groups should be present at the respective meetings. Given the size of the 1st-year group, feedback specifically on tutorial management and tutorial teaching quality should be included in the discussion at the 1st-year meeting.

Research and Scholarly Activity

- The Department shows strong evidence of a vibrant research culture and the Department benefits from the varied backgrounds and training of its members.
- We were interested to see that there were different theoretical perspectives deployed in the Department's research. Some of this had to do with rethinking social theory and some with innovative attempts to offer explanations of particular problems in the contemporary world and in particular in Ireland. Care should be taken to value each of these different theoretical approaches.
- Work that is both theoretically sophisticated and empirically informed could become the hallmark of this Department.
- The Department could benefit from more harnessing of its considerable potential for innovative research, particularly among its non-tenured members. We recommend that the Department seek "Tenure-B contracts" as appropriate for its research-active but non-tenured staff, in consultation with the Research Office.
- We recognize the success of members of the Department in attracting HEA funding for the "Identity" and "Women in Irish Society" projects. However we believe that the Department should continue to be active in seeking funding from different national and international sources.
- The Department should develop pro-active research initiatives of an inter-disciplinary nature, in the context of current and future funding sources for such projects.
- The Department may need to shift the current prevailing emphasis in its thinking towards a more project-oriented and outgoing research climate which might begin with the proposition: "How can my discipline contribute to current sociological problems and issues?" For example, the sociology of environmental risk and the sociology of health, both currently represented in the research work of sociologists working in the Department, may offer opportunities for the Department to enhance its research activity.
- The Department could probably benefit from making active liaison with the Research Office: we recommend that this might be initiated by an invited visit by the Vice-President for research to the Department. This would offer an occasion for the full range of staff members, with their various research interests, to be acquainted with the new opportunities for humanities and inter-disciplinary research.

Staff Development

- The Department currently has a system of sabbatical years, arranged in rotation, for permanent staff. One member of staff whom we did not meet was presently on sabbatical leave.

External Relations

- The report states (p.4) that “the task of professors should lie in providing academic guidance, and not in administrative-bureaucratic leadership”. This may be the primary role of professors, who should, and certainly in this case do, lead by scholarly example. However, the Group believes that where a professor is head of Department, s/he cannot avoid full engagement with the pragmatic processes involved in college and Department administration and governance, and indeed with the *Realpolitik* of the institution. We have reservations about the withdrawal of any member of staff from these general processes.
- There is a widespread impression that, given its excellent scholarly standing, the Department nevertheless tends to have an image of remoteness in the wider college community, where it does not enjoy the high profile it merits. The Department would benefit from greater visibility and higher political profile: it would be strategically valuable for the dept to have a greater engagement by all of its members in the day-to-day politics of the university.

Support Services

- The Department has administrative staff of the very highest calibre. Their courtesy, efficiency and dedication means that the service they give to the Department’s students is outstanding.
- The Department’s core housing is in buildings whose condition is far below an acceptable standard. They are shabby and poorly maintained. We note with dismay that repeated efforts by the head of Department to have some of these physical defects remedied have met with no response from the Buildings and Estates Office. This situation is unacceptable.
- The space in which the college expects the Department to function is very seriously inadequate. It is irrationally organized, staff offices and teaching rooms being interspersed among the accommodation of another Department. The severe shortage of space has a further damaging effect on the capacity of non-tenured but pivotally important teaching staff to function efficiently. In particular, the administrative office is minute and totally lacking in privacy. No access whatever for the disabled has been provided, even on the ground floor.
- The college needs to ensure that space which is rented for Department teaching and tutors’ accommodation is up to standard. “Ardeevin”, currently used for these purposes, has no central heating, its wiring is antiquated, it is poorly lit, no Internet access is available there, and it evidently has not been decorated for many years. No students or staff should be expected to do their work in such an environment.
- Concerning the Library, we have taken particular note of the head of Department’s unanswered correspondence with the Librarian. The issues Professor Szakolczai raises are serious ones, which undermine the Department’s capacity to function as either a teaching or research unit. The Department’s reported experience of library services is dismaying: book acquisition and the procedures for book ordering were found to be slow and cumbersome, cataloguing disorganized and inconsistent, and access information consequently confused. We understand from our own visit to the Library that the post of Head of Technical Services is vacant. We recommend that this post be filled. In general, we strongly recommend that the Quality Improvement Review of the Library be brought forward to the earliest possible moment.

Strategic problems to be dealt with at college level

Adequate contractual arrangements for temporary and part-time staff

We welcome the college's action in the creation of Tenure-B contracts for research staff, but serious and urgent attention needs to be paid also to the issue of adequate contractual arrangements for part-time and temporary staff whose main contribution is in the undergraduate teaching and administrative area. This is a strategic problem for the college in general; the need to address it urgently was especially apparent in this review.

Research management

The Research Office has been a dynamic initiative and has successfully opened up many avenues for Departments and individual staff to develop and gain funding and recognition for research projects. Its "open-door" policy, which welcomes approaches from research-active individuals whatever their status in the college, is to be praised, and all staff should be made more aware of this. There was evidence of inadequate communication by the Research Office of these opportunities, including the developing of adequate and inclusive electronic mailing lists, possibly leading in some cases to the missing of grant application deadlines.

The library

The Department took the view that the funding available for library acquisitions in their field was seriously inadequate, and cited a recent reduction of approximately one-third in that budget. UCC has a stated strategic objective of becoming one of the top twenty universities in Europe by 2005 (*Agenda for Excellence*, p. 7). The percentage of the college budget allocated to library resources needs to be made comparable with that in other Irish universities and with European institutions with which it wishes to compete.

The institutional culture of UCC

It is our perception that elements of an institutional culture which relies upon "corridor politics" and sidesteps the objective of transparency and open communication, still permeate UCC. There is a danger that the workings of the college are being rendered opaque to those who come from the outside. We recommend that a formal induction process be set up to acquaint incoming staff, especially heads of Department, more fully and actively with the structures and procedures of the college. The Group also saw evidence that in certain crucially important support areas, letters are not answered and no action is taken in spite of repeated requests. Such a degree of discourtesy is completely unacceptable.

Strategic initiatives

The college has identified a new Social Sciences Building as an objective in the *Agenda for Excellence* (p.48). The development of a proposal for this building is identified for 2000, but the Group gained no sense that Sociology as a Department was involved in this planning process. We recommend that a working party involving all the Departments in this subject area be set up to formulate an academic strategy for the implementation of this project.

Budgeting

Concerning the management of Faculty budgeting under the new devolved system, the setting up of a body representative of the sixteen Departments concerned should be a priority objective, to improve transparency about the criteria being used to determine Departmental resource allocations.