



Maynooth University

**Department of
Psychology**

Quality Review 2019

Quality Improvement Plan

Quality Improvement Plan, Department of Psychology, Maynooth University.

The Department of Psychology is grateful to the Peer Review Group (PRG) for their careful scrutiny of our Self-Assessment Report, their focused probing during the site visit and their very useful and prescient insight into the department and its place within both the discipline of psychology and Maynooth University. We are pleased to note that the PRG found good evidence that the department has an excellent academic staff cohort with a good balance across career stages; an excellent record of high impact research; an excellent track record in engaged research; comprehensive established international professional networks; strong collegiality and a shared 'sense of mission' within the department; strong alignment of departmental priorities with the University Strategic Plan; a strong record of service to the profession; and, strong interdisciplinarity, both internally to the University and externally. Equally, we are very pleased that the PRG recognised the University's strong commitment to the department, and that during a highly challenging period for Irish higher education, "Psychology at Maynooth University has been singularly successful".

We note the strong commendations of the PRG for the collegiality of both the University and the department, and the strong shared sense of mission and endeavour that underpins the department's activities. These values are integral to the department, and it is deeply heartening to have such values so strongly endorsed.

The PRG makes eighteen *Recommendations for Improvement* in total. These are structured into two categories: *Institutional/Strategic Recommendations (S)*, of which there are ten; and *Recommendations for the Department (U)*, of which there are eight. In drafting this Quality Improvement Plan, the department was in a position to directly address the eight *Recommendations for the Department*. However, the majority of the ten recommendations for the institution entail resourcing or institutional operational issues which cannot be directly addressed by the department. Where appropriate, we have indicated where the department may be in a position to indirectly address these recommendations through negotiation and partnership with the institution; however, ultimately only the university is in a position to directly address these recommendations.

A number of the recommendations for the department were already identified in the Quality Enhancement and Strategic Development Plan in our Self-Assessment Report, and as such we had already put in train steps to address these issues (e.g. issues around the gathering of student feedback). We find the recommendations fair and useful; if successfully addressed, the Department of Psychology at Maynooth University will be enhanced. In drawing up this Quality Improvement Plan, the recommendations of the PRG were discussed at two departmental staff meeting and one special meeting of the departmental Teaching and Learning Committee; following this, the head of department drafted the following point-by-point reply and action points to each of the eighteen recommendations, and this plan was circulated to all staff for comment and refinement.

Institutional/Strategic Recommendations.

S1. Staffing.

“There was a clear commitment to improving the amount of administrative support available in the previous QR ten years ago. This issue remains unaddressed, despite burgeoning growth since then in all respects. Strengthening administrative support should not be at the cost of academic hiring.”

Departmental Response: We agree with the Peer Review Groups finding that the current level of administrative resources available within the department is a “severe threat/weakness”. We are disappointed that there have been no additional administrative resources allocated to the department in recent years to address this severe weakness. This is despite the fact that in recent years departmental student FTEs have risen by ~100%, absolute student numbers by >120%, post-doctoral staff by >300%, academic staff cohort by 60%, the introduction of work placements into some of our programmes and that current departmental research income has risen by at least a factor of 4 in recent years, currently standing at ~€10,000,000. Further, changes in central administrative processes have increased the administrative burden on our department substantially. However, administrative resources in the department available to service these areas have not increased at all since the last departmental Quality Review in 2009.

Departmental Action:

Submit a case for additional administrative support through the annual staff review institutional process.

S2. HoD Succession

“The current Head of Department finishes his term in the next few months. We feel that succession planning, and perhaps a more focused set of HoD expectations, are urgent priorities.”

Departmental Response: The role of HoD for the Department of Psychology is a rewarding but strongly challenging one, carrying with it an increasingly unsustainable set of expectations and duties. This situation is exacerbated by the severe lack of administrative support at an appropriate grade available to the HoD; there is no departmental administrator at a “decision making” or partial managerial grade to assist the HoD and allow for meaningful delegation of tasks and decisions away from the HoD. As such, there is a *de facto* requirement that the HoD be involved in all aspects of the operational minutiae of the department. The net effect of this is that the HoD must make substantial cut backs to their own academic and research work, work unsustainable hours and limit their academic travel and professional development in order to deal with day-to-day departmental matters. Furthermore, the HoD is not afforded sufficient time and space to focus on higher level, strategic issues; rather, much time and effort is expended reactively on minor operational issues. The lack of payable allowances to Associate Professors who take-on the role of HoD provides further disincentivation to colleagues who may be interested in filling the role. Resultantly, and unsurprisingly, the attractiveness and sustainability of the role are strongly impaired, and succession planning is difficult in the context of (understandably) very limited interest in taking on such an unattractive role as currently configured.

Departmental Action:

As for S2 - Submit a case for administrative support at an appropriate level through the institutional process of annual staff reviews.

Explore the possibility of the Deputy Head of Department serving as head of teaching and learning for the Department: this would be akin to having a Head of Studies.

Use the opportunity at the commencement of a new Head of Departments term to plan for the assignment of tasks/roles to the wider group of staff within the Department.

S3. Student Facilities.

“Facilities for undergraduate students within Psychology are very limited; morale and engagement would benefit greatly from discipline-dedicated facilities.”

Departmental Response: We agree with this point, and recognise that we are not in a position to provide communal spaces for undergraduates within the department given our current restricted estates footprint. We have no space currently in use for non-essential purposes that could be re-purposed as student common facilities.

Departmental Action:

Engage with the Vice-President Estates to document the Department’s additional space requests.

S4. Student Feedback/SELE

“The Department noted the limitations of SELE as the University’s formal mechanism for measuring the student learning experience. The Department’s plans to devise and introduce its own annual review are noted, but these may need to take cognisance of institutional moves to develop a new scheme.”

Departmental Response: We agree with this point, and the department will seek to inform the development of the successor to the recently suspended SELE system for gathering student feedback at the institutional level. We will also be cognisant of such developments as we put forward new local mechanisms for gathering student feedback at the departmental level and involving the student voice more in the academic decision making of the department.

Departmental Action:

The Department continue to make use of the mechanisms developed at the departmental level for gathering module and programme level feedback and to work to ensure that mechanisms developed locally are not redundant and/or conflicting with institutional mechanisms as these are developed.

S5. Infrastructure: Consolidation (space).

“The Department understandably wishes to accommodate its whole staff, postgraduates etc within the same building. We support this request fully- and suggest that a clear plan and timescale for doing so is discussed with Psychology by the University’s VP for Estates or equivalent responsible officer.”

Departmental Response: The Department of Psychology is currently spread across three sites; as recognised by the PRG this is a sub-optimal arrangement, and represents a threat to the collegiality of the department. Further, the nature of some of our accommodation is described by the peer review group as being of “poor quality”. We will continue to engage with the VP Estates to ensure that our space requirements are understood, that the needs of Psychology as an experimental discipline are appreciated and taken into account in other aspects of estates planning, and that suitable space and facilities are provided for our students and research staff.

Departmental Action:

As for recommendation S3.

S6. Infrastructure: Refurbishment.

“Various areas, e.g. replacement of Windows 7 PCs in the computer laboratory, seem overdue. Other areas (PG room) would benefit from refurbishment and addressing of smell and noise issues.”

Departmental Response: We agree that various areas and resources of the department are in need of refurbishment or replacement. We would note that the department has no dedicated budget for physical refurbishment, and that works must be funded from a small recurrent budget that must also cover all other operational costs of the department. We are in discussion with the Dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering with a view to replacing the suite of PCs in the student computer lab; these were last renewed in 2011. We will continue to make some of the unique requirements of a research-intensive psychology department clear to University management to ensure that our departmental accommodation is professional, fit-for-purpose and of good quality.

Departmental Action:

As for recommendation S3.

Additionally, the Department to work with the Vice President Estates Office to request refurbishment and renewal of departmental infrastructure.

S7. Infrastructure: Resource Allocation Methodology

“We note the absence of a formal Research Allocation Methodology. Inevitably such RAMs are less than perfect, but we would urge the University to proceed with haste with the most adequate methodology available”

Departmental Response: Notwithstanding the attendant difficulties in formulating and operating a RAM that does not entail perverse incentives and unintended consequences, we note difficulty in formulating

departmental strategy in the absence of such a model. Indeed, there is a lack of formal set of parameters made available to us against which our requests for resources might be tailored (e.g. it is unclear what role, if any, research income and outputs currently play in resource allocation, whether weightings are applied to postgraduate taught and research students relative to undergraduate students and how institutional strategic priorities are operationalised in resource allocation). The availability of a RAM would allow the department to make rational and informed strategic decisions around future commitments and resultant resourcing issues.

Departmental Action:

In anticipation of the University exploring RAMs that are in use elsewhere, the Department to continue to channel requests for additional resources through the University mechanisms in place.

S.8 Staff well-being: Disincentivising sabbaticals.

“The external members of PRG were shocked to realise that staff are effectively financially disadvantaged by taking a sabbatical. This exacerbates the challenges for staff with family/caring responsibilities, and we would encourage the University to examine the discriminatory potential of the current scheme and address its shortcomings, not least in the context of the University’s Athena Swan award and the Department’s ambition to apply for Bronze.”

Departmental Response: Remarkably, in the twenty years of the department there has only ever been one single (recent) period of sabbatical leave taken by an academic staff member. This is despite the fact that of the current cohort of academic staff, 50% have ten years or more service in the department. As noted by the peer review group, the requirement to take a pay cut of up to 35% in order to avail of sabbatical leave is a profound disincentive, especially for staff with family and caring responsibilities. The paucity of sabbatical leave impacts on staff morale, potentially impairs the retention of excellent, talented and motivated academic staff and limits the development of new research opportunities, collaborations and professional networks.

Departmental Action:

Continue to work within the Department to establish a culture wherein the taking of sabbatical leave is viewed as both normal and vital to a vigorous academic career. The University is committed to looking at sabbatical leave models which should address this recommendation in time. In the meantime, the Department to continue to use its workload allocation to facilitate research time where possible.

S9. Staff well-being: Promotions delay.

“We recognise that delays in promotions rounds have complex origins, many outside the institution’s control. However, Psychology as a university discipline /profession is thriving in Ireland and staff recruitment and retention is highly competitive. Delays in promotion rounds make these challenges still harder to address.”

Departmental Response: We agree that lack of opportunities for promotion and academic advancement can be strongly detrimental to staff morale, and can exert strong negative impacts on both staff retention

and recruitment. We are pleased to note that a regular annual promotion scheme from Lecturer (Assistant Professor) to Associate Professor has been announced as of autumn 2019, alongside a biennial scheme for promotion to Professor B. This institutional commitment and clarity is to be strongly welcomed. We await further updates on pending promotion schemes for administrative and technical staff, which we believe will be forthcoming by 2020.

Departmental Action: Upon announcement of promotion rounds, the HoD and other senior departmental staff will provide support for applicants for promotion, as well as encouraging eligible staff to apply for promotion.

S10. Staff well-being: Staff development opportunities

“We would encourage the institution to provide more staff development opportunities for staff at all levels. This will not only enhance staff capability, but boost staff retention, and well-being.”

Departmental Response: We note that recently, after a number of fallow years in terms of staff development, the University has offered a number of courses for staff development, and we believe that there are further plans in motion for increasing this provision.

Departmental Action: The senior leadership of the department to encourage all staff members of all grades to avail of staff development opportunities offered by the University, and also by external providers where appropriate (with appropriate support provided on a case-by-case basis). The use of Research Incentivisation Fund (RIF) to fund specific research training activities on a case-by-case basis to continue to be facilitated at Departmental level.

Recommendations to the Department.

U.1 PhD Students

“We feel there is substantial opportunity to enhance the experience and future employability of post-graduate research students. This would involve extending the group-based support available to some PhD students to all, increasing the opportunities for PGR students to present their research in the Department, providing effective training in transferrable skills”

Departmental Response: Through the structured PhD programme in Psychology, students are already offered, and given credit for, a number of opportunities for enhancing their research and transferrable skills (e.g. presenting research at international conferences, taking part in external specialist training programmes). However, we do agree that further opportunities internal to the department may be provided, both to enhance scientific and professional skills and to strengthen collegiality. In January of 2019 the department held a “Research Day” during which all research students were offered the opportunity to make presentations of their research work. Given the success of this event, we plan to make this an annual event allowing all research students at least one opportunity per year to make an oral presentation of their work to an audience of their peers.

Departmental Action: The department commits to providing annual departmental research events such as the hosting of the annual Research Day to showcase postgraduate and postdoctoral research, with oral presentation opportunities offered to all research students and staff.

U.2 Teaching Assistants, support and training

“The Department needs to address issues around the intended purpose, expertise, training and monitoring of Teaching Assistants (see above) It should also address what we see as questionable practice with regard to TA marking assessments which contribute directly to Degree grades, and the support provided for the psychological studies students e.g. mixed tutorial groups.”

Departmental Response: All Teaching Assistants in the Department are strongly encouraged to take the Centre for Teaching and Learning’s Professional Certificate in Teaching and Learning for Tutors and Demonstrators. However, to be eligible for this course tutors must already be engaged in teaching assistant duties, creating a circular effect in terms of training and teaching delivery. Given that departmental tutorials start at the same time that incoming PhD students are registering, there has been very limited room for teaching assistant induction and training. We will address this issue by thoroughly revising our tutorial scheme, delaying the start of tutorials until one month into the first semester and instigate a structured programme of induction, training and support for teaching assistants that incorporates aspects of peer support. On the issue of teaching assistants marking work that ultimately contributes to the final degree mark, all work in second and final year of the psychology programmes contributes to the final degree mark under the current set of University Marks and Standards. We feel that it is not feasible in a research-intensive department for all pieces of undergraduate work to be graded solely by academic staff. Rather, with careful and structured moderation procedures and oversight by academic staff, we strongly feel that teaching assistants can reliably grade some pieces of continuous assessment.

Departmental Action: We formulated a working group of the Departmental Teaching and Learning Committee to overhaul the tutorial scheme for operation in the 2019/2020 academic year, in parallel with developing a comprehensive programme for in-house training and support of teaching assistants. It is envisaged that one aspect of this will involve peer support and peer learning between more and less experienced teaching assistants. Year managers will have primary responsibility for the induction, training and support for teaching assistants contributing to their year’s tutorial scheme. We will continue to liaise with the office of the Dean of Teaching and Learning to understand centrally provided supports for teaching assistants, and tailor our supports to complement these. For the composition of tutorial groups, for final year we will split the Psychology and Psychological Studies groups in 2019/2020 on a trial basis.

U.3 Monitoring of teaching quality and student engagement.

“There appears to be little opportunity for students to feed back individually on the content, quality etc of what they are taught in Lectures and Seminars. There are real benefits both to morale and staff capability to doing this well. We recommend that the Department explores the potential for using systems which work well elsewhere. We believe it would enhance the Department to have more opportunities than twice

yearly meetings to ‘hear’ more of the student voice, and perhaps work towards the more ‘partnership’ approach adopted in other HE institutions.”

Departmental Response: It is clear (as we noted in our self-assessment report) that the University-wide SELE system for gathering module-based feedback was not delivering meaningful/actionable student feedback for the department, and has served to displace other (more effective) methods of eliciting student feedback that were previously applied locally in the department. To address this deficiency, for the end of the 2018/19 academic year we re-introduced a global programmatic evaluation survey for all of our students, containing both quantitative and qualitative opportunities for students to feedback on their experience across the year. This instrument appears to have worked well, with a response rate of ~40% (and 60% for final year students), and has provided the department with very useful and actionable feedback that will inform the refinement and improvement of our programmes and their delivery.

Further, a special meeting of the Teaching and Learning Committee was convened in April 2019, with an open invitation to all students of the department with a view towards mapping out mechanism to further include the student voice and perspective in the life of the department. As action points of that meeting, it was decided that there would be invitations to undergraduate students to be members of the Teaching and Learning Committee, that the Staff-Student Consultative Committee would continue in its current format, that student representatives would now solely be voted for through the Student’s Union electoral system, that minutes (redacted as required) of the Staff-Student Consultative Committee would continue to be made available through Moodle but also flagged via lecturer announcements, and that a number of focus groups would be convened during the 2019/2020 to further gather qualitative feedback.

Departmental Actions: (A) Continue with the application of the end-of-year global programme feedback survey; (B) monitor University-level developments in the gathering of student feedback; (C) re-constitute the membership of the departmental Teaching and Learning Committee to include student representatives, so that students have a voice in the operational procedures of the department’s teaching and learning activities; (D) enhance the visibility of actions arising from the Staff-Student Consultative Committee to ensure that the feedback loop is closed, and is seen to be closed; (E) constitute focus group sessions to enhance opportunities for qualitative student feedback.

U.4 Coursework submission procedures

“We were surprised to learn that course work is submitted in hard copy, having been electronically submitted to Turnitin. Electronic submission, marking and feedback would reward the efforts involved of students and staff- and reduce an unnecessary administrative load.”

Departmental Response: We have moved to on-line submission (through Moodle) for all coursework in the 2019/2020 academic year to streamline the process for all involved. We would note that marks entered on Moodle will still need to be entered manually into the University system for return of examination results, a system that seems to us to be very far from ideal given the many thousands of marks requiring returning each year.

Departmental Actions: Move to exclusively on-line mode of submission, through Moodle, for all coursework, for the 2019/2020 academic year.

U.5 Research breadth, critical mass and strategic direction

“The panel were very impressed by Psychology at Maynooth University, across the breadth of its involvements. However, we feel that the Department lacks a clear, coherent psychological identity (see above).”

Departmental Response: We note the peer review group’s observation that *“In some senses, what PRG has reviewed is a Department in transition... Our view of the weaknesses and potential threats may thus seem somewhat unfair.”* As the department seeks to research at the frontiers of the discipline of psychology, and to work across (rather than be confined by) traditional disciplinary silos, we appreciate that this is a more difficult identity to project than one in which there is a narrow focus on a defined area. We are also cognisant that given the recent changes in the academic staffing of the department, that our research identity may still be nascent, and is not yet fully concretised through visible outputs and activities. We anticipate that our particular research identity will further crystallise in the coming years. However, we accept that these developments should be carefully shaped by a coherent departmental context and mission, and that appropriate dissemination steps are utilised to successfully communicate our research philosophy and activities. To aid this, and to ensure that future departmental developments are cohesive and strategically guided, we will work to develop an explicit strategic plan for the department for the period until 2022 (the expiry of the current University strategic plan).

Departmental Action: Formulation of a departmental strategic plan for the period to 2022, encompassing explicit statements of our research mission, identity and priorities.

U6. Departmental identity and Masters opportunities.

“We commend the Department’s desire to engage with the University priority to extend its PGT provision, and note the plans to develop three Masters in collaboration with other disciplines across the University. We would encourage caution in pursuing this ambition, because of its potential to support or dilute the Department’s developing identity, and encourage Psychology to develop and introduce these in stages, so that resources are not spread still more thinly, and the development and delivery of subsequent courses may gain from the experiences of those that went before.”

Departmental Response: We agree that a measured approach, in partnership with the University, will be required for the introduction of new Masters level taught programmes. In particular, programmes will need to be sustainable, serve identified societal needs and be adequately resourced. Further, new programmes will need to dovetail with departmental priorities, to ensure added value for both prospective students and for the department. As such (noted in U.5), we will develop an explicit strategic plan for the department that will include plans for development of postgraduate programmes and steps to ensure they are aligned with other aspects of the department’s strategy, and reinforce rather than dilute the department’s identity and mission.

Departmental Action: Formulation of a departmental strategic plan for the period to 2022, encompassing explicit steps and timescales for proposing and implementing new taught Masters programmes, aligned to other departmental priorities and reinforcing the department’s mission and identity.

U7. Collegial support for “sabbatical” relief.

“We encourage the Department to actively plan how it might make sabbatical research leave both more attractive, and feasible, for all members of academic staff. We note the University’s flexibility with regard to consolidating teaching, temporary covering of responsibilities by colleagues for each other, etc.”

Departmental Response: We agree that with recent growth in the academic staff quotient of the department, there can now be opportunities for the department to support periods of intensive research focus, to allow staff to pursue particular activities such as research visits, preparation of major bids for research funding and other significant activities as may arise. It is envisaged that the department would be in a position to provide one such period of intensive research focus each year. Details of a flexible and transparent scheme will be drawn up.

Departmental Action: We will develop and implement an annual scheme allowing departmental staff to engage in periods of intensive research focus.

U.8 Management of workload model/explicitness and flexibility

“We note the staff’s satisfaction with workload allocation, but remain unsure as to how it operates, its explicitness, and ability to cope with increasing demand, other than by relying on the goodwill of staff. Workload management would also, ideally, consider opportunities for Departmental responsibilities to change, facilitate brief research leave/ sabbatical cover, etc.”

Departmental Response: We are disappointed that the operation of our workload model was not fully apparent to the peer review group; we have worked hard over the past four years to develop a detailed and transparent workload model, and would have been glad to clarify any further aspects of this during the site visit. However, any departmental workload model is to a large extent internally-referenced and circular; departmental academic duties (especially teaching and academic administration) are part of a closed loop system in which there is a set amount of work which needs to be delivered by the department. The workload model serves to help ensure that the work is equitably shared within the department, but cannot regulate the total amount of duties that need to be carried out and overall resources available to deliver those duties. We will continue our efforts to refine the workload model to ensure that it continues to be flexible, transparent and fair. We will also carefully consider workload implications of future departmental developments as part of the departmental strategic plan to be formulated.

Departmental Action: We will continue to refine our workload model, as well as monitoring total levels of workload to ensure sustainability of the department’s activities and well-being and motivation of the department’s staff.