

**DEPARTMENT OF ADULT AND
COMMUNITY EDUCATION
QUALITY REVIEW**



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

PEER REVIEW REPORT

JANUARY 2004

**Report of the External Advisers for the
Department of Adult and Community Education
on the Quality Review visit to the
National University of Ireland, Maynooth,
27-29 May 2003**

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Review was concerned both with the assessment of the nature and quality of the Centre and its programme as a whole, *and* with the developmental strategy for adult education in the context of the University's overall Strategic Plan. The Review thus took a somewhat unusual and broad form and the Report that follows addresses both aspects of this brief.
- 1.2 The Review enabled the External Advisers to meet with a wide range of staff and students. This included not only all members of academic, administrative and support staff in the Department (at present Centre) but also with a good cross section of adult learners in the various programmes (including those studying at the Kilkenny Campus) and senior management within the University. One of the most impressive features of the Review was the extent to which senior management in the University were willing to give their time to discuss strategic issues in the area of adult education, and also their demonstrable commitment to both the practice and the underpinning values of the Department of Adult and Community Education (hereafter, the Department). At a general level, we were very impressed with the commitment of the University to the lifelong learning agenda, broadly defined, and specifically to the work and the achievements of the Department.
- 1.3 In general terms, the range of provision and the uniformly high quality of programmes is quite remarkable given the small staffing base of the Department. Both the University and the Department are to be congratulated on an extremely high quality and valuable adult education provision. As is the case with other analogous Departments in this field, it is significant that an important element in this proven success is the coherent multi and inter-disciplinarity of the Department's staff and work.
- 1.4 Having said that, there are serious issues of resource capacity for the ambitious agenda already being addressed, and still more for the future developmental agenda. Furthermore the nature of the contractual positions of some of the staff in the Department is most unsatisfactory.
- 1.5 We were impressed by the enthusiastic response from the students whom we met about the beneficial impact that their involvement with the University, through the programmes of the Department, has had on their lives, both professionally and personally. We would wish to emphasise the importance for the University of the role of the Department in acting as an "ambassador"

for the reputation and profile of the University across a wide range of influential community contexts in the locality and the region. Although this is very hard to measure, we believe that it is an invaluable aspect of the University's provision and has an indirect impact upon the demand for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the mainstream provision in the institution.

- 1.6 Of particular note in the achievements of the Department has been the success of "research and development" and consultancy work, as detailed in the Self-Assessment Document (SAD). This is a unique and valuable aspect of the Department and in our view should be built upon in the future. It is important to note that this is distinct from, but complementary to, more mainstream academic research in adult and community education, continuing education and lifelong learning. These latter areas of research are currently not well-represented, understandably, in the Department's achievements and is something we discuss in terms of recommendations in Section 4.4 below.
- 1.7 There is an overall problem of resource capacity in the existing structure and staffing of the Department, given its role not only in programme provision but in the development of the University's profile and activity in lifelong learning. The University is uniquely well-placed in the Irish context to build upon its leadership role in policy development, academic research, research and development consultancy work, and "policy impact" in the increasingly important area of lifelong learning (including potentially the Access brief)
- 1.8 As already noted, the level of commitment to and support for adult education from the senior management of the University is impressive; and this commitment is clearly a part of the University's overall future strategy for lifelong learning. There is though a lack of clarity about the ways in which the realisation of this commitment is envisaged and the roles which the Department will in future have the opportunity to fulfil. We believe that circumstances are now such that it would be advantageous for the University to formulate further, more detailed strategic planning for the University-wide development of Lifelong Learning, and of a staffing and resourcing plan to support this. Even for its existing wide range of provision, the Department clearly has an inadequate staffing base; and there has been a lack of continuity in the leadership of the Department in recent years.
- 1.9 We are concerned that the University is thus in danger of losing its national (and potentially international) strategic and policy leadership role by delaying the restructuring and strengthening of the Department and its profile. (One prominent example of the University's success in influencing the policy agenda was the involvement of Professor Coolahan and Dr Collins with other colleagues in the production of the influential Government White Paper on Lifelong Learning.)
- 1.10 The Department has many strengths – some of which are discussed in the following section in rather more detail – but as an introductory contextual comment we would note in particular both the existing strengths and the potential for future development in two areas: the professional expertise in

“training the trainers” in the field of Professional Education and Training; and the unique expertise the Department enjoys in Community Education Development and related areas at both national and international level.

2. **The nature and quality of the existing programmes**

2.1 The range of programmes, particularly given the very modest size of the Department and its variegated staff structure, is very impressive. Both the External Advisers work in University contexts where the scale of resources is considerably greater in this field, but the breadth and quality of the achievements is not commensurately more. The Department and the University are to be congratulated upon both the innovation apparent in the provision and the very high quality overall of the curriculum and pedagogy which is evident across a wide range of subject areas and levels of learning in the fields of adult, community and continuing education and lifelong learning.

2.2 In general terms, the programmes are not only well taught and of high quality but the administrative and support structures and the qualification frameworks are well organized and articulated. The commitment of **all** staff in the Department is particularly commendable and there was abundant evidence of strong student support for, and appreciation of, the services offered. Given the historical problems over contractual arrangements (see below Section 3) the level of commitment that is evident is impressive.

2.3 Our views on the quality matters have been informed by qualitative and quantitative information from the following sources.

2.3.1 The Department’s Self-Assessment Document.

2.3.2 Detailed course approval information, student feedback forms etc. made available to us in a convenient format in the room assigned for the Review visit. (Note: we regard this as exemplary practice on the part of the Department).

2.3.3 Extensive discussions with students from a wide range of courses, including:

- outreach community based programmes
- Return to Learn courses
- certificates
- diplomas
- degrees
- continuing professional development courses
- postgraduate courses
- doctoral students

The contribution made by the courses provided by the Department to the enhancement of these individuals’ opportunities to engage in Lifelong Learning was highlighted in every single case by people from very different walks of life. It is a measure of the value they placed on

the work of the Department that several had taken time off work to meet with us and had travelled considerable distances.

- 2.3.4 Useful meetings also took place with part-time tutors. Many of these fulfilled a dual function as representatives of external partner agencies. Once again the uniquely innovative and flexible capacity of the Department was emphasised by all involved.
- 2.3.5 We were appreciative of the time taken by the Vice-President, Registrar and a number of senior people from other parts of the University to meet with us. These discussions were particularly important given the multi and inter-disciplinary nature of the Department and its potential role in supporting broader areas of University strategic development associated with Lifelong Learning, access and the like.
- 2.4 There are inevitably issues concerning the comparability of standards and quality in the programmes of the Department – particularly given the very largely part-time staff engaged upon the teaching programme – compared with the “mainstream” provision of the University. This is an area which we suggest is explored in more detail in order to establish demonstrable comparability as the University changes to a modular structure.
- 2.5 Our first Recommendation refers to the need to review the awards structures and the “fit” of the Department and its provision with the mainstream of the University. At present, many of the certificates and other awards of the Department are notionally linked to undergraduate level study and the credits awarded are calculated accordingly. In practice, however, many of the programmes are in effect foundation or access routes for entry to part-time or full-time degrees at Maynooth or elsewhere. Whilst the satisfaction levels (and indeed the success in terms of entry) are impressive, this is essentially an anomalous position. In a non-modular system, this “administrative untidiness” might not be a matter of great moment. However, given that the University is embarking upon a modularisation process with, at least in principle, a system of CATS arrangements between Adult Education modular provision and the appropriate provision across the mainstream of the University, this situation needs to be regularised within the reasonably short-term. *We would therefore recommend that an **ad hoc** group is established, with a senior member of the University in the chair, and membership from both Adult and Community Education and other appropriate Departments, to examine and re-codify the awards structures of the Department.*
- 2.6 This recommendation highlights one of the dilemmas which is common to all such continuing education and lifelong learning contexts in higher education. There is a need to preserve both the flexibility and responsiveness of the Department in its myriad relationships and partnerships with the outside community; but also a need to recognise, and indeed implement, procedures whereby the Department and its provision can be brought more closely into the structures of the mainstream University. This will involve no doubt uncomfortable cultural changes for the Department, as well as some

readjustment in perspective by the mainstream University. However, it is our strong conviction that such readjustment, if accomplished successfully, will be of great mutual benefit. It will clearly be a high priority for the incoming Head of Department to ensure this process is developed during the lead-up to modularisation across the institution.

- 2.7 There are implications for University structures in terms of adult education and lifelong learning. It is important that the Department of Adult and Community Education is formally part of a grouping of University departments with complementary interests. Clearly, this should include the Department of Education, with which the Department of Adult and Community Education has such close affinities both actual and potential. However, it would be of mutual benefit for there to be close links also, in any future restructuring, between the Department and departments with cognate interests in the social sciences area, reflecting the Department of Adult and Community Education's strong multi- and inter-disciplinary base and provision. This would provide for the broad range, not only of Adult Education Professional concerns but also the strong provision of the Department in such areas as socially-oriented professional provision, guidance and counselling, public interest courses predominantly in the social studies and related arts areas, etc.

We therefore recommend that any possible School or Faculty reconfiguration or new grouping of Departments, should ensure that the links which the Department of Adult and Community Education currently enjoys with other relevant areas, in particular in the social sciences, are enhanced.

3. **Issues of staffing**

- 3.1 There have been problems over contractual issues and the appropriate designation of staff in the Department. Adult Education (and Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning generally) are always problematic in terms of formal definition of staff roles. For most colleagues in such contexts, the role is inherently a hybrid one. The lecturer typically is neither a conventional academic – in terms of exclusive concentration upon teaching and research functions – nor an administrator in the conventional sense. Rather, most roles in such contexts are combinations of teaching, “research and development” activity, organizational and supervisory duties, and most importantly innovative networking and developmental work. The supervision, induction and mentoring of quite large numbers of part-time staff also involves a managerial and developmental role for most full-time colleagues. The situation in Maynooth is thus not unusual. However, it is particularly noticeable in the Maynooth context both because of the small numbers of the staff involved and the complicated and unsatisfactory nature of the formal contractual position of many of the staff. We understand that some normalisation of contractual arrangements has now taken place through the permanent appointments of four members of staff as ‘Academic Programme Coordinators’.

- 3.2 Nevertheless, we found that there remain anomalies and a lack of coherence over staffing issues. *We therefore recommend that a review should be*

undertaken by a senior officer of the University, in conjunction with the incoming Head of Department, to regularise the contractual position of all staff in the Department. Other things being equal, we would suggest that where there is an ambivalence over the roles of academic-related staff, such colleagues should be formally classified as standard academic grade, but with the formal specification in their job description that they would be expected to engage in developmental, administrative and related work as appropriate. Most of the colleagues we spoke with, and the track record of the Department in research and development, suggests that it would be of great benefit not only to the individuals concerned but also to the University, for staff to be engaged in research and publication in addition to their existing roles.

- 3.3 The regularisation of the contractual position of several of the longstanding and valuable colleagues in the Department is a significant issue. Some colleagues had been on a non-standard, informal contractual basis (including, for example, absence of pension rights etc.) for more than a decade. Whilst this problem seems to have been resolved recently, an overall review of staffing is required (see 3.2).
- 3.4 At a more general level we have concerns about capacity within the Department. While the appointment of a Professor will provide greatly needed additional senior input, we think the matter of the overall level of staffing needs to be kept under review, given the enhanced roles envisaged for the Department and its staff.
- 3.5 The appointment, as soon as possible, of the proposed Chair in Adult and Community Education is in our view crucial for the strategic development of both the Department and the University in the area of adult education and lifelong learning. *We therefore recommend that the appointment to an appropriately titled Chair should be made as soon as possible.*

4. Infrastructures within the Department

- 4.1 In our view, the SAD is an effective and cogent expression of the Department's ethos and its strong commitment to a series of radical educational values. This is a good basis for the development of a Strategic Plan for the articulation, within the new context, of both the programme and the values of the Department in the future. We believe that the preparation of a Strategic Plan is an urgent and essential task for the Department over the next few years. *We therefore recommend that the incoming Head of Department should, as a priority, lead discussions for the development of a five year plan (2004-2009).* Amongst other things, the Strategic Plan should encompass values, aims, objectives, and strategic priorities, within a realistic staffing and resource base. The plan should include an appendix which outlined in some detail a business plan structure with annual milestones for achievement and indications of the resourcing bases as appropriate.
- 4.2 In this context, it is important for the Strategic Plan to articulate clearly a mission statement deriving from the strong ethos which is expressed so vividly in the SAD.

- 4.3 In structural terms, we would recommend (in common with the wishes of the Department) that there should be restructuring of the Department in order to focus its priorities more clearly. We welcome the University's establishment of a Sub-centre (or Division) with responsibility for continuing education. We believe that further structural changes are necessary and *we recommend therefore that Centres (or Divisions) should be developed within the Department, each led by an experienced member of staff with an explicit leadership role as Co-ordinator (or Director) with responsibility for (normally) 0.5 of their time.* In addition to the Continuing Education Sub-centre (or Division) there is clearly a strong case for the establishment of a Sub-Centre (or Division) for Adult Education Professional programmes (ie. training programmes for adult, community and continuing education professionals)
- 4.4 However, it is less clear how other important aspects of the Department's work should be organized. Assuming that the staffing base of the Department is increased – as it must be if the Department is to fulfil its delivery, R&D, administrative **and** University-wide roles – the remaining structural changes might be organized as detailed below.

The Department has considerable strengths in the “Research and Development” area, and these should be maintained and developed. On the other hand, the Department has relatively little tradition of academic research and scholarship, and externally funded research contract work, in the more mainstream university sense – the development of which we suggest should be a high priority for the future. We see two possible ways forward:

- **either** one further Centre (or Division) which would be concerned: with innovation in adult and community education; with an explicit link to developing a cohort of M.Litt and PhD students; and with secondary functions in staff development, in encouraging the publication of research findings and ‘R&D’ work, and in developing more externally funded work.
 - **or** two further Centres (or Divisions) should be created, one on “Research” (ie. the development of scholarly publications and the undertaking of externally funded research projects), with a staff development role for the Director (who might be the new Professor) for encouraging most if not all staff across the whole Department to undertake such work; and the other on “Projects and Development” which would focus attention upon the development of “Research and Development” activities for which the Department has a justifiably high reputation. This latter would encompass a strong emphasis upon innovation and partnership which, although running through all the Department's activities, would be especially a function of this Centre.
- 4.5 Which of these options, or variants of them, is chosen is an important decision and, we suggest, should be a matter for the new Professor to decide in consultation with the senior management of the University and with

colleagues in the Department. The choice is not only an administrative matter, but will be important in determining priorities and culture for the strategic development of the Department over the next five years.

- 4.6 In relation to the overall restructuring suggested here, the role of the incoming Professor and Head of Department would be to lead this development and to chair, within the new structure, a “management group” whose membership would be *ex officio* the Co-ordinators (or Directors) of each of the sections. Alongside the existing (and excellent) generic support staff structure, additional support staff input would be needed for each of the Centres (or Divisions).
- 4.7 We noted the strong advocacy by some colleagues in the Department for a specific focus upon “Guidance and Counselling”. On reflection, however, we would suggest that this is included, with explicit reference, in either the Continuing Education or Adult Education Professional programmes Centres (or Divisions).

5. **The role of the incoming Head of Department (and Professor), to be appointed**

- 5.1 The job specification for the Professor (to be appointed) is clearly a matter for the University and lies outside the formal remit of our brief. However, it was suggested by the President that we might make some initial observations, and this we are of course happy to do. We would suggest provisionally that the University might give consideration to the following broad specification:

- at least 50% of the Professor’s time should be devoted to the leadership and development of the restructured Department of Adult and Community Education as specified above.
- the role of adult education and lifelong learning across the whole institution is, however, a matter of strategic importance for the University as a whole. *In the light of this, we recommend that consideration be given in the specification for the post to the inclusion of an explicit reference to a leadership and development role for the adult education and lifelong learning strategy **across the institution.*** This might include specific reference to such areas as
 - (a) the integration, to mutual benefit, of the provision of modular adult education programmes and a large part of the mainstream provision of the University as a whole, under the proposed new modular system;
 - (b) a specific concentration on the “access” agenda, encompassing not only mature learners but also non-traditional background but standard age younger entrants and their social and family contexts (very often within an educational environment of deprivation);
 - (c) the application of APL;

- (d) the vocational skills and CPD agenda which the University might wish to consider as a general focus for future development across a number of subject areas;
- (e) the enhancement of inter-departmental and inter-faculty co-operation over lifelong learning development.

5.2 If this strategy were adopted, Maynooth would be well placed to consolidate and further develop its high national profile and reputation for innovation in adult education and lifelong learning. It could also be advantageous in an international context.

5.3 If the research aspects of the Department are to be seen as a major priority, it is important that the job specification for the Professor (to be appointed) should include a requirement for an established research and publications achievement, and successful experience of research management.

5.4 In order to take forward, and make explicit, the University wide role of the new Professor, it might be considered sensible for the University to consider one of the following innovations:

- **either** the creation of one or more specifically focused committees for particular strategic priorities. For example, if the University regards the Access area as of importance, not least from the perspective of future admissions strategy, and the flexible mode of learning provided to suit learners in different contexts, then one structure that might be appropriate would be to create a new sub-committee of Academic Council on “Access”, chaired by the Vice-President or an appropriate senior manager in the University, with *ex officio* representation from across the disciplinary structures of the institution. The new Professor of Adult and Community Education (to be appointed) could be identified as a key *ex officio* member of the committee with responsibility for drafting strategic papers and subsequent implementation. If deemed appropriate this model could be extended to other key areas of University strategic development in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning (for example, vocational skills and CPD.).
- **or** the creation of a University wide senior post (perhaps, as was suggested to us by several colleagues, this might be equivalent to the Dean for Research, or an additional Vice-President, or Associate Vice-President) which the new Professor would undertake for a time limited period. Although this may be a departure from established University practice, it would have the great advantage of giving explicit recognition of the strategic importance of adult education, access and lifelong learning for the University as a whole.

6. Resources

- 6.1 As already noted, the Strategic Plan for the Department that we are advocating should be accompanied by a Business Plan with detailed indications of the extra resources required and the basis upon which they would become available over a short to medium-term period (we suggest five years).
- 6.2 Whilst we realise that the “non FTE (self-financing)” provision of the Department cannot be changed without an amendment at national level by the HEA, we would nevertheless argue that this is an anomalous position in a context where Lifelong Learning (and part-time Higher Education generally) is seen as a key national priority – for both economic/vocational and social/personal development reasons. Part-time adult students in Higher Education in Ireland are discriminated against under the current system (as indeed they are in most other European countries, certainly this is the case in the United Kingdom). We recommend that the University should do everything in its power to press for this anomaly to be rectified as soon as possible.
- 6.3 If this anomaly can be corrected, then the financial position of the Department (and indeed of the University in this area) would become much more rational and secure. In the meantime, we suggest that the new Professor, in liaison with the Registrar and other senior officers, should produce a report on the present and future resourcing structure required to enable the Department to undertake its important functions.

7. Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1 (para.2.6): *We would therefore recommend that an ad hoc group is established, with a senior member of the University in the chair, and membership from both Adult and Community Education and other appropriate Departments, to examine and re-codify the awards structures of the Department.*

Recommendation 2 (para.2.8): *We therefore recommend that any possible School or Faculty reconfiguration or new grouping of Departments, should ensure that the links which the Department of Adult and Community Education currently enjoys with other relevant areas, in particular in the social sciences, are enhanced.*

Recommendation 3 (para.3.2): *We recommend that a review should be undertaken by a senior officer of the University, in conjunction with the incoming Head of Department, to regularise the contractual position of all staff in the Department.*

Recommendation 4 (para.3.5): *We therefore recommend that the appointment to an appropriately titled Chair should be made as soon as possible.*

Recommendation 5 (para.4.1): *We therefore recommend that the incoming Head of Department should, as a priority, lead discussions for the development of a five year plan (2004-2009).*

Recommendation 6 (para.4.3): *We recommend therefore that Centres (or Divisions) should be developed within the Department each led by an experienced member of staff with an explicit leadership role as Co-ordinator (or Director) with responsibility for (normally) 0.5 of their time.*

Recommendation 7 (para.5.2): *We recommend that consideration be given in the specification for the post (of Professor of Adult and Community Education) to the inclusion of an explicit reference to a leadership and development role for the adult education and lifelong learning strategy across the institution.*

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25 June 2003

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