



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Mhúaid

**Quality Review of the
Department of Adult & Community Education
October 2008
Peer Review Report**

Peer Review Group:

External reviewers: Professor Jean Barr,
University of Glasgow, Scotland
Professor Chris Duke,
RMIT University, Australia

Internal reviewers: Professor Jim Walsh,
Deputy President, NUIM
Dr David Redmond,
Reigstrar, NUIM

1. Preface note

1.1 Managing continuing education (CE) in a university is an unusually challenging balancing act. It requires engaging with diverse communities and interests beyond the university; understanding and practising the philosophy of adult education; and also belonging to and extending the university with sensitivity to its traditions and values. Such departments have a dual identity and purpose: as scholarly units in their own field of theory applied to practice; and as catalysts, facilitators, brokers and boundary-spanners for the whole institution in respect of needs and learning clienteles beyond the young direct school-leaver population.

1.2 This review of the NUIM Department of Adult and Community Education in October 2008 was the first in NUIM's second cycle of quality reviews. This carried the challenge of having no direct precedent to model on, and offered an opportunity to address the unique character of the Department of Adult and Community Education in a relatively untrammelled way.

2. The Department

2.1 Adult education has been actively pursued as part of the mission of NUIM for 30 years. During this time about 50,000 students have taken advantage of this provision. The Department and the Centre from which it grew represent an important aspect of the work and influence of the University, but one that has been under-recognised, partly because it is in the university adult education tradition to take a low profile internally, while concentrating on 'serving the community' externally.

2.2 Following the 2003 review, DACE has acquired full status as an academic department within a faculty, led by a full professor as Head of Department.

2.3 The scope of its work is large, with outlets for programmes in almost every corner of the Republic, and a particular investment, recognised and supported by the Higher Education Authority, in the Kilkenny campus. The Peer Review Group gained the sense of a vigorous and properly ambitious Department, constrained inevitably by resources and the fee regime which leads to high costs for some students (one doctoral student who has studied over the years with DACE mentioned that the total cost of his fees has now reached 28,000 euros), but constantly exploring ways of doing more and better work.

2.4 This includes the use of new learning technologies; connections with new and different partners within the University and beyond; better architecture for academic progression using credit recognition and transfer; and intellectual enquiry through appropriately chosen research agendas which relate to and extend the formidable community of experienced scholar-practitioners taking advanced degrees who are part of the DACE academic enterprise.

2.5 Counselling and related areas (such as Addiction Studies) alone constitute a major enterprise and contribution to Ireland and Irish society, often in difficult and important areas. The total volume and the range of local, regional and national, on- and off-campus programmes and modes are impressive. The Department leads in its field within Ireland, meeting an essential need that no other third level institution can match, and enhancing its national and international profile, in line with the University's ambitions expressed in its own strategic plan.

2.6 It is not surprising that the Department is looked upon with favour by the University's leadership. Despite the difficult global, national and institutional circumstances at the time of the review, it is timely for the Department to promote more vigorously and confidently what it is doing; and vigorously to continue enhancing its profile, influence and partnership efforts within the University in advancing the purposes of continuing education, access and wider opportunity, lifelong learning and professional updating throughout the institution.

3. The Self-Assessment Review

3.1 The Guidelines for this round of Quality Reviews require self-assessment reviews (SARs) to relate departmental purpose and performance to University strategic planning. The DACE SAR shows the connections to the direction sought by the University in respect of its teaching, including an expanded range and volume of advanced graduate teaching; its increased emphasis on research, with the creation of a departmental Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education; and its lifelong learning and community outreach and engagement efforts, which align especially with the University's Strategic Goals 5 and 7.

3.2 The process for conducting the SAR, as explained to the Review Team, faithfully reflected the Department's clearly articulated participatory values and style of planning and management. It is sufficiently distinctive and important to warrant explicit mention, as is the accompanying DVD produced by DACE as part of the SAR, which is strikingly original, not only within Ireland. It was also evident that the process has resulted in deep and widely shared understanding of and commitment to departmental purposes and directions.

3.3 This keen involvement led the reviewers into many vigorously engaged discussions about how to overcome difficulties and move towards shared goals, during the review team visit. It was noteworthy how far this entirely positive energy, commitment and engagement with issues and purposes extended beyond core full-time staff to the wide DACE 'community' of part-time tutors and sometimes very advanced scholar-learners dispersed across the Greater Dublin area and the whole of the country. Some travelled from distant corners of the land to meet with the review team.

3.4 The SAR referred systematically to advice and recommendations contained in the 2003 quality review, showing progress since then and indicating aspirations for proceeding further. The SAR concluded with an Action Plan in five sections, to which we respond below. The first cluster, described as 'resourcing the field', relates to aspirations and distinctive characteristics sought for the Department's research.

3.5 These include the new Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education, to sit within the Department alongside its substantial Continuing Education Programme. It caught our attention that the University President, in referring to this, spoke also of the prospect of its 'promotion' in due course to become a full University Research Institute.

3.6 The second aspect of the Action Plan is the Department's own internal management. The next two relate to study opportunities for part-time students, including teaching space, and what is described as an out-of-hours university.

3.7 Finally, the SAR seeks to widen the Department's influence, building on recent progress. Here it would be useful to make a more explicit distinction between influence within NUIM, and influencing the national higher education policy arena. The former is a proper part of championing the cause and needs of non-traditional, part-time post-experienced learners who have much to offer the University, rather than in any sense arrogant. It is timely, given the understanding shown towards DACE within its very senior administration. In light of the Government response to the recent OECD review, working through NUIM may also offer hope of influencing the wider Irish policy environment in the direction of lifelong learning through higher education.

3.8 While the reviewers were deeply impressed by the quality of the SAR, including its mode of creation and its evidently strong adoption throughout the Department and indeed implicitly beyond, they were also struck by the absence of a unifying Department-wide strategic plan, despite the existence of strategic plans for the Research Centre, for Continuing Education, and for the Kilkenny campus. We see this as related to the Department's own second action plan area of management.

4. The Responses of the Reviewers

4.1 Given the wealth of discussion enjoyed by the external reviewers, from broad purpose to drilling into the fine detail of nitty-gritty administration, this report makes no attempt to include everything that was seen and considered. The very process of SAR and review team visit inevitably represents a change-and-development process for the Department, which will lead to further examination and in some cases change of practices in the next period. This section picks out just some of the main issues.

4.2 Key strategic issues for the University and the Department

4.2.1 DACE is an energetic, highly productive and dedicated, professionally capable and efficient part of the University, which brings credit and high visibility to the University and substantially advances the declared purposes of NUIM.

4.2.2 Its modes of organising itself and managing its work are well fitted for purpose, given the diversity and often physical separation of the sub-groups and work of DACE. This requires clarity and strong internal drive. These modes are unfamiliar to parts of central 'mainstream' administration geared to handling large numbers of more 'standard' students.

4.2.3 Patient and open dialogue between DACE and different central administrative services could yield mutual benefit in terms of efficiency and economy (eg. in the collection and use of vital institutional data). NUIM centrally could learn much of wider value for its relations with and administration for students as 'clients' (who are fee-paying in DACE today, and may be more widely so 'tomorrow'), as perhaps could other teaching departments.

4.2.4 There is a tendency to assume, because of its strong student-centred and professional ethos, that DACE may have more time available to indulge in student care. This is a misperception. On the other hand central academic services such as library and computing appear sympathetic and open to helping and to learning from and with DACE.

4.2.5 NUIM could usefully examine, more systematically, ways in which the experience generated in DACE could with benefit be shared by other academic and support units in the University.

4.2.6 The policy environment for NUIM is changing significantly: most recently as a result of the global economic and financial crisis; already before this from the ecological and sustainability awareness that calls forth new teaching and research agendas and forms of 'engagement'; from changing demography; and from the social needs that these and other environmental shifts are creating.

4.2.7 DACE demonstrates essential flexibility, capacity for partnership, and openness to new ideas, approaches and curricula. These respond well to Ireland's needs at all levels, and to the identity and aspirations of NUIM. DACE has in general underplayed its contribution within the University. It is in the interest of both NUIM and DACE for the Department to enhance its profile and to publicise its work more widely and vigorously.

4.2.8 This includes making DACE teaching programmes, including their credit and progression arrangements, widely known, and seeking to expand the number and depth of contributors/partners from other NUIM Departments. It also means being encouraged to take a more direct part of institutional policy-making where this relates in any way to a broadly understood lifelong learning agenda, including access and wider participation strategies and arrangements, modes of advanced post-graduate study in the participatory, action-research modes where DACE excels, and in the development of more research which straddles disciplines and departments.

4.2.9 Not many universities in the western academic tradition have proved very successful in supporting and benefiting from a DACE-type unit which is both a respected academic department performing well in the competitive academic environment and an institutional-wide development unit which is thus part of the university's 'central services' facilities. By being conscious of the value of such a dual identity and supporting both wings of endeavour, NUIM can benefit significantly from the existence and work of DACE.

4.2.10 It is not immediately evident whether NUIM has the necessary mechanisms in place to consider those aspects of its mission that have to do with lifelong learning. These range from engagement in local, regional and national economic and social development through professional updating, educational progression and credit recognition to access, and accessibility.

4.2.11 New modes of provision which are more flexible may also benefit young and full-time students. The out-of-hours university concept might be widened to mean the flexible university, accessible in different ways over longer periods of time, such that the dichotomous division between full- and part-time students fades away (as has happened for example in Australia and New Zealand).

4.2.12 The Department is extending its relations and partnerships with different academic departments. This commendable step-by-step informal network approach might be strengthened if NUIM were to appoint a Board or Forum for Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education chaired by the President or his senior nominee, with representatives from each Faculty and key community representatives drawn from across all sectors. Deliberative rather than decision-making, such a body would develop and disseminate ideas, good practice etc. It could perhaps best be created as a Committee of Academic Council.

4.2.13 Such a body could be serviced in terms of agenda, papers etc by DACE in its role as an incubator of innovations as well as a key delivery arm for such work. Its ideas would feed into NUIM research and teaching/learning strategic planning. The newly appointed Dean of Teaching and Learning would be a member *ex officio*.

4.2.14 The Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education. offers a means of extending this side of DACE work and its international and national profile. The research record and proposals represent a distinct, well thought out and appropriate approach in philosophy and methodology of wide relevance and utility. The benefit could extend to other departments especially in the social sciences.

4.2.15. In the medium term and based on its record, plans should be developed to have the Research Centre recognised as a designated Research Cluster, and if appropriate in due course an application should be submitted to seek the more enhanced status of a University Research Institute, taking care not to reduce the vital synergy and mutuality of benefit that derives from being embedded in diverse DACE practice, and the wide community of practitioner-researchers that this represents. This is in accord with the DACE research centre strategic plan aspiration to become a University- recognised national research centre.

4.2.16 DACE, through the new Centre, might consider affiliation, via honorary attachment of carefully chosen and prominent adult education scholars (to the level of Adjunct Professor) at least from within the wider Irish academic and professional community.

4.2.17 The Kilkenny campus has proved a success, and is widely appreciated and well used. It is for all practical purposes at present a DACE venture, carried on behalf of NUIM. Its wider use by other departments for other programmes might be good, where opportunity and need coincide.

4.2.18 Kilkenny might prove to be a model for further Irish development of a university presence in other towns and hinterlands without a university presence, but in terms of policy for third level institutions it has the appearance of being a unique one-off venture, at least for the time being.

4.2.19 By far the largest part of the Department's enterprise, and visibility, within NUIM as well as in the wider society, is provided by Continuing Education, for which a substantial 2008-2013 Strategic Plan has been drafted. This refers to formalising the role of CE in widening participation for part-time adult students, and expanding the 'out-of-hours' on-campus programme (with space implications); extending the present consolidation and initiation of external collaborations especially with the most disadvantaged; and staff development for its educators. It refers also to creating a dedicated R&D unit for Addiction Studies, and to promoting an explicit research and innovation culture in CE generally.

4.2.20 The CE strategic plan elaborates on each of these purposes, noting too its invisibility within NUIM. It refers to work on RPL (the Recognition of Prior Learning), use of the NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications), and the need for integration of services into mainstream administrative systems.

4.2.21 The plan aspires to giving students access to a wider range of student services. In this and related respects to do with the cost and use of infrastructure and support services, the review team noted uncertainties to do with costing and charging in a context when CE students pay fees for tuition while full-time undergraduates are State-funded, yet are often from among the less and least affluent groups in the community.

4.2.22 As part of the clarification and strengthening of the role of the Department as a university development as well as course delivery facility, efforts should be made to clarify the nature of income, appropriate principles governing the use of income streams, and the best level and means of providing support to Continuing Education. It is for the University to determine how best to achieve this, but dialogue between Registrar, Bursar and DACE would be necessary, including different administrative and service areas.

4.2.23 Such discussion might contribute to a broader objective: making NUIM still more attractive to all potential students in a competitive environment in which regular students tend to be more discriminating, have higher expectations, and may shop around more for the best and most flexible courses and support systems. NUIM enjoys a good reputation as a client-oriented and innovative institution. Resolving 'untidy' DACE service requirements on behalf of CE students could deliver wider institutional benefits.

4.2.24 The 5th and 6th CE goals concern research: a dedicated R&D unit for Addiction Studies to meet needs arising in this nationally significant area of NUIM expertise through DACE; and to promote an explicit research and innovation culture in CE.

4.2.25 What the reviewers did not find was any reference in the CE strategic plan to the work of the Centre for Research in Adult Learning and Education..

4.2.26 There is a risk that the excellent and essential cross-fertilisation and reciprocity that occurs between work areas and work groups in this fluid and matrix-like ('clusters of teams' in DACE's words) Department could be emasculated and even lost, as different sections grow in strength and ambition. At its crudest, some measure of give-and-take cross-subsidy, managed to mutual and shared benefit all round over time, is a working necessity. At a higher level, much of the potential for a research centre and a strong cadre of doctoral staff resides in the CE area, while the utility of much of the Department's own research should be tested and exploited first of all 'in house' at DACE and NUIM levels.

4.2.27 This brings us to a consideration of departmental management, but before that, noting the rising profile and output of DACE research and published papers even without a distinct Research Centre, the reviewers had several discussions about best means of disseminating this work. Ireland is a small country, and wide-impact dissemination is a problem. There is a place for in-house publication of staff and advanced student work, but dissemination is difficult. Nor does such publishing carry the weight of external and evidently refereed research studies.

4.2.28 It is recommended that, while continuing to publish in-house where appropriate, DACE should seek to place its more scholarly academic writing in

established and refereed journals, including such outlets as the UK-based *IJLE* and *Studies in the Education of Adults*, as well as using less academic outlets like the NIACE monthly *Adult Learning*, and the German DVV's *Adult Education and Development*. Opportunity might be sought to have monographs accepted by one of the major publishing houses with strong listings in both lifelong learning and higher education.

4.2.29 Especially for the more practitioner-oriented and manual-style work, a partnership might be broached with NIACE to take NUIM-originating titles, and/or to co-list and disseminate more broadly.

4.3 The internal management and work of the Department

4.3.1 This review has made reference to management implications of the unique dual nature of DACE (more broadly departments of continuing education and lifelong learning). These have obvious relevance for NUIM general administration as well as for DACE internally, and there are obvious links.

4.3.2 It has also referred to the absence of a unifying strategic plan, and possible fissiparous and centrifugal tendencies within DACE, which would contradict its participatory, open and collaborative principles and tendencies.

4.3.3 The reviewers gained an impression of sensitivity about adopting too directive and hierarchical a structure. The SAR does however raise the need for further change, following the reorganisation recommended in the 2003 review report. The SAR notes that the inclusive cluster and staff meeting approach is unusual within the University.

4.3.4 The reviewers note that this distinctiveness is met elsewhere with attitudes ranging from unqualified admiration and approval – clearly many people both inside and beyond NUIM find DACE a highly stimulating and rewarding professional setting with which to be involved – to mild puzzlement and some wonderment as to how staff find the time to treat students so individually. The Department does present ‘problems’ in being different in its needs and student clientele, but no criticism was discerned about its inclusive ways of managing its affairs.

4.3.5 The SAR makes several sensible proposals to improve the management and use of the great volume of data that must be collected and used, and about communication and representation, as well as the continuing development of its own army of full- and part-time faculty.

4.3.6 The SAR focuses especially on the ‘mainstreaming’ of part-time students into the normal life and thinking of the University. This is a University rather than a DACE matter. It involves a paradigm shift from ‘real’ and ‘marginal’ students to a diverse single body of lifelong learners studying at different levels and in different ways at different points in their lives. It is indeed principally an Irish rather than an NUIM problem. The review recommends that NUIM recognises its leadership role among Irish universities in mainstreaming part-time students, and seeks to build on this in its own and the national interest.

4.3.7 As to the management of DACE itself, the SAR calls for a ‘compatible model of leadership’ for planning, management and decision-making which honours its participatory ethos, and visualises some kind of small group of staff. The reviewers discern, in the absence of a DACE strategic plan embracing and if necessary reconciling the three sector plans, diffidence about exercising too obviously the leadership authority that such a large, complex and significant operation requires.

4.3.8 It is recommended that as a priority the Head of Department with a small group of staff who between them represent the necessary relevant areas of knowledge draft an integrative strategic plan for DACE which is then adopted by the full staff. No doubt such a plan will be developed and revised through ‘local’ consultation and a full staff review get-together. The Head of Department will thus carry full support and authority in taking it forward.

4.3.9 This Executive Group should be especially alert to ensure that the different parts (clusters, teams, work areas) within DACE continue to interact, value, support and cooperate with one another.

4.3.10 Some kind of standing group, possibly called a DACE Executive Group could be created, with fixed basic membership and flexibility to draw in others as needed, and to accept alternates when need arises, to steer business, look forward, and monitor performance across all areas. Meeting with the Head of Department regularly and as often as real business requires, it can report into and take guidance from the specialised clusters as well as the full staff meeting. Such an arrangement does not affront participatory principles and learning opportunities for all staff; it does give them more focus, and ensure follow-through from such discussion.

4.3.11 We have earlier proposed a University-wide Board or Forum for Lifelong Learning, as a main (but far from only) vehicle for DACE input to University planning and development, which DACE would support and might ‘service’. It is for DACE in its evidently mature ongoing deliberations to determine from time to time what other arrangements it might wish to create more ‘locally’ for stronger ongoing student and community consultation.

5. Recommendations and Guidance for Future Development

5.1 Our conclusion is that, wider national economic and institutional difficulties notwithstanding, the future for DACE, especially under current imaginative and far-sighted NUIM leadership, appears bright. The Department has won its spurs and its position academically, expanding and strengthening its many programmes to a position of national visibility and significance; its research is now making linkages internationally, and its national partnerships continue to grow in strength.

5.2 DACE occupies a unique and necessary place in Irish higher and adult education. It brings credit to the University. Apart from inevitable resource limitations, the problems that it encounters can in the main be overcome by patience and goodwill between DACE and other parties, especially in the different central services and administration. Internal academic recognition and links can be steadily grown.

5.3 Many finer details of quality enhancement are in the minds of DACE staff in the light of this self-assessment and subsequent dialogue. Most will no doubt lead to action. Only the most salient are included in this report, and brought together here:

It is timely for the Department to promote more vigorously and confidently what it is doing; and vigorously to continue enhancing its profile, influence and partnership efforts within the University in advancing the purposes of continuing education, access and wider opportunity, lifelong learning and professional updating throughout the institution (2.6)

DACE has in general underplayed its contribution within the University. It is in the interest of both NUIM and DACE for the Department to enhance its profile and to publicise its work more widely and vigorously. (4.2.7)

NUIM could usefully examine, more systematically, ways in which the experience generated in DACE could with benefit be shared by other academic and support units in the University (4.2.5)

[DACE should be] encouraged to take a more direct part of institutional policy-making where this relates in any way to a broadly understood lifelong learning agenda, including access and wider participation strategies and arrangements, modes of advanced post-graduate study in the participatory, action-research modes where DACE excels, and in the development of more research which straddles disciplines and departments (4.2.8)

patient and open dialogue between DACE and different central administrative services could yield mutual benefit in terms of efficiency and economy (4.2.3)

the out-of-hours university concept might be widened to make the flexible university, accessible in different ways over longer periods of time, such that the dichotomous division between full- and part-time students fades away (4.2.11)

it would be useful to make a more explicit distinction between influence within NUIM, and influencing the national higher education policy arena (3.7)

The review recommends that NUIM recognises its leadership role among Irish universities in mainstreaming part-time students, and seeks to build on this in its own and the national interest (4.3.6)

appoint a Board or Forum for Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education chaired by the President or his senior nominee, with representatives from each Faculty and key community representatives drawn from across all sectors... such a body... could perhaps best be created as a Committee of Academic Council (4.2.12)

The [research centre] plans should be implemented as soon as resources make this possible. In the medium term and based on its record, plans should be developed to have the Research Centre recognised as a designated Research Cluster, and if appropriate in due course an application should be submitted to seek the more enhanced status of a University Research Institute(4.2.15)

as part of the clarification and strengthening of the role of the Department as a university development as well as course delivery facility, efforts should be made to clarify the nature of income, appropriate principles governing the use of income streams, and the best level and means of providing support to Continuing Education (4.2.22)

some measure of give-and-take cross-subsidy, managed to mutual and shared benefit all round over time, is a working necessity. At a higher level, much of the potential for a Research Cluster and a strong cadre of doctoral staff resides in the CE area, while the utility of much of the Department's own research should be tested and exploited first of all 'in house' at DACE and NUIM levels (4.2.26)

while continuing to publish in-house where appropriate, DACE should seek to place its more scholarly academic writing in established and refereed journals, as well as using less academic outlets.. Opportunity might be sought to have monographs accepted by one of the major publishing houses with strong listings in both lifelong learning and higher education (4.2.28)

it is recommended that as a priority the Head of Department with a small group of staff who between them represent the necessary relevant areas of knowledge draft an integrative strategic plan for DACE which is then adopted by the full staff (4.3.8)

a DACE Executive Group could be created, with fixed basic membership and flexibility to draw in others as needed, and to accept alternates when need arises, to steer business, look forward, and monitor performance across all areas. (4.3.10)

6. Comments on the Review Process

The seriousness of the response to the 2003 Department Review shows that the quality review process is acted on, as part of a process of reflective and cyclical improvement. The 2008 self-assessment review took the 2003 report as a reference point and connected subsequent thought and action to its findings. There is every reason to think that the new round of reviews, flowing from department to faculty level, might be fully as valuable, as a form of development for NUIM and its constituent parts.

In terms of processes, the Department was exemplary in its conduct and hospitality, arranging a full and well calculated series of meetings, and providing ample opportunity both for triangulation and for follow-up clarification with key members of the Department. The timetable was intense, and the decision to split the reviewers between Kilkenny and on-campus meetings on the 2nd day was well judged.

Only the external reviewers were involved in the evidence-gathering series of discussions. While this may be appropriate for more conventional academic departments, the unique dual identity of CE means that much of importance would be gained if internal reviewers could also be involved, especially in meeting the part-time staff and the student and community-based groups.

The choice of internal reviewers from the Quality Sub-Committee strengthens the institutional grasp of the quality process itself, and its capacity to generalise learning and quality enhancement. However, such a gain might be enhanced if one of the two internal reviewers was drawn from a somewhat kindred department, and not necessarily from the Quality SC; and if at least this second internal reviewer did accompany the externals throughout the process.

On the other hand, the generous time allocated for the four reviewers to meet prior to and for the exit presentation did ensure active understanding and buy-in on the part of all the reviewers to what was concluded. This is important if proposed actions are to have the full support of the University itself.

Professor Jean Barr
External Reviewer

Professor Chris Duke
External Reviewer

Professor James Walsh
Internal Reviewer

Dr David Redmond
Internal Reviewer