



**NUI MAYNOOTH**

*Ólascóil na hÉireann Mhí Nuad*

## **Quality Review of An Foras Feasa**

**22 – 23 February 2010**

### **Peer Review Report**

#### **Peer Review Group:**

**External Reviewer:**

**Professor Harold Short, Director &  
Head of Department, Centre for  
Computing in the Humanities, King's  
College London.**

**Internal Reviewer:**

**Professor Ray O'Neill, Vice President  
for Research, NUI Maynooth .**

## **Peer Review Report**

### **NUI Maynooth: An Foras Feasa**

#### **1. Preamble**

'An Foras Feasa' is usually abbreviated to 'AFF' in the main body of the report.

#### **2. Introduction**

##### **2.1 The Inter-disciplinary 'problem'**

Certain difficulties arise in assessing a group such as AFF whose initial conception and mode of work is inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary. The comprehensive assessment of a group such as AFF would require specialists in Irish Studies, History, Linguistics—and perhaps a number of other discipline areas in the Humanities—as well as Digital Humanities and Computer Science (that is, Applied Computer Science). The External Reviewer is a Professor of Humanities Computing who has worked for over 20 years in the Digital Humanities. The review necessarily, therefore, has a Digital Humanities focus.

##### **2.2 An Foras Feasa**

The following brief description is taken from the Self-Assessment Report, Section I.1 p.3. 'An Foras Feasa: the Institute for Research in Irish Historical and Cultural Traditions was formally recognised as a research institute in NUIM in 2006. In 2007, the Institute commenced its formal operations, with the appointment in February 2007 of its Director and Associate Director and the securing in August 2007 of funding under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL) Cycle 4. In the period 2006-2007, research collaborations with AFF partners, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and Dublin City University, were developed, and AFF was established as a research grouping within the national Humanities Serving Irish Society consortium.'

AFF, while anchored at NUI Maynooth, now has over 60 members across the four institutions. It has core funding support for the director, associate director and technical and administrative posts until late 2010. Disciplines encompassed include English, Celtic Studies, History, Music and Modern Languages.

References to the Self-Assessment Report are shown as *SAR*, followed by section, sub-section and page.

##### **2.3 Digital Humanities**

To explain the terminology, 'humanities computing' may be thought of as describing the application of information and computing technologies in research and teaching across the humanities disciplines, and 'digital humanities' as describing the compass of such activities. In practice, the terms are often used inter-changeably, and the report adopts this practice.

The origins of humanities computing lie in the pioneering work of an Italian Jesuit, Roberto Busa SJ, who in 1948 persuaded the President of International Business

Machines, Thomas Watson, to donate an IBM computer to the seminary north of Milan where Busa was carrying out research on the works of Thomas Aquinas. More widespread use of computing methods in humanities research dates from the late 1960s / early 1970s. By the late 1980s it was becoming established as a distinct area of disciplinary activity, with annual international conferences and two peer-reviewed journals. Although a young disciplinary field, it is now quite well established, with four peer-reviewed journals and a number of institutions with lectureships and chairs in Humanities Computing/Digital Humanities, and degree courses offered at undergraduate, Masters and PhD levels.

*Distinguishing characteristics of Digital Humanities:*

- Fundamentally inter-disciplinary (e.g. between Computer Science and a Humanities discipline) or multi-disciplinary (where more than one Humanities - or Social Science - discipline is involved).
- Transformative, primarily in methodological terms, in:
  - enabling or facilitating new kinds of research or new research methods;
  - enabling 'old' types of research to be carried out in new ways;
  - providing new research opportunities.
- Fundamentally collaborative, within and between institutions and across national boundaries.
- Presents problems of peer review because of both its multi-disciplinarity and its collaborative nature. Similarly presents difficulties in career development and progression for many of those most centrally engaged in it.
- Presents particular challenges in dealing with the digital resources that are often the outcome of digital humanities research:
  - accessibility and ease of use by non-specialists, where complexity has often to be managed for the benefit of a wide range of potential readers;
  - provision of a wide range of examples of use, for both research and teaching;
  - use of international standards and structured methods so as to enable re-use for new or different research and teaching;
  - structures and processes that facilitate inter-linkage and inter-operability between different digital resources;
  - organisation and management of digital repositories to ensure availability and access;
  - preservation of both the content and the 'behaviours' of digital resources;
  - 'sustainability', to ensure appropriate updating of both the technical framework and the scholarly content.
- Across an increasing number of institutions, digital humanities behaves and is regarded as a new area of disciplinary activity in its own right. It has the essential character of a discipline, albeit one that is fundamentally collaborative: undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programmes; PhD research (often co-supervised); distinctive research questions; international peer-reviewed journals and other publication venues; scholarly associations; international conferences.

## **2.4 Peer Review Process**

The external reviewer's visit took place 22-23 February 2010. It involved meetings with the AFF Director, Associate Director and staff, with senior NUIM management, including the President, and with a variety of AFF stakeholders, including members of the Management Board, Heads of Department, academic research partners, Post-Doctoral

Fellows, Doctoral Fellows, and undergraduate students. In addition there were meetings with Heads of service (Library and Computer Centre) and support staff (Research Support Office). There was also a telephone conversation with an external stakeholder (Irish Film Archive).

The main disciplinary focus in the meetings was digital humanities, but in many conversations there was a clear sense of disciplinary boundaries becoming blurred, and of seeing digital humanities as the 'supporting infrastructure' for the other research priorities of AFF - Multilingualism and Multiculturalism, Ireland and Europe, and Cultural Heritage and Social Capital - just as envisaged by AFF itself (SAR III.1, p.14).

In all the meetings outside AFF the common thread was enthusiasm for the existence of AFF, for the experience of working with AFF, and for the commitment and engagement shown by AFF staff to all with whom they interact, at all levels. Senior managers made clear their continuing commitment to the strategic objectives that underlay the establishment of AFF. Research partners at all levels expressed appreciation for the depth of intellectual engagement by AFF staff in their research projects. Meetings within AFF were marked by a very strong sense of commitment and purpose. At the same time almost everyone - inside AFF and outside - expressed concerns about the challenges to be faced and the longer-term sustainability of the enterprise.

From an external perspective, the achievements of AFF over the short period of their existence have been striking, and the staff have already established a strong presence at the annual international Digital Humanities conference, with several papers presented at DH2009 in Maryland, and further submissions for DHD2010, which will take place in July 2010 at King's College London. Awareness of this impact, and pride in the achievements of AFF, were reflected in a number of the conversations during the review, with clear views expressed of its special role within NUIM and its status as a - perhaps *the* - leading digital humanities group in Ireland, as well as an understanding of the significance and potential of its international engagements.

*Undergraduate teaching:* the discussion with two undergraduate students reflected well on AFF. One student had chosen her course very specifically, and it was living up to her hopes and expectations, with an MA in AFF her next goal. The other would not have chosen the course, but was nevertheless finding it beneficial, especially the project work.

*MA plans:* these look very good, and are comparable in structure and proposed content with the best in the field.

*Research:* the emphasis on young scholars (e.g. the PhD and Post-Doctoral fellowships) is particularly encouraging and important, recognizing the significance of such training and opportunities for the future not only of the digital humanities but of the humanities more broadly. This is clearly an important part of the AFF and NUIM ethos.

*PhD Research:* the students interviewed showed great enthusiasm for their research, in particular its cross-disciplinarity, as well as for their experience of AFF and the quality of support they were receiving from AFF staff. They expressed a strong sense of excitement about the new opportunities they saw opening up for them, within and across disciplines.

*Post-Doctoral Fellowships:* the Fellows interviewed expressed similar though more mature enthusiasm for their work in and with AFF. They expressed a clear sense of how their experience of collaborative research had changed their perspectives on: their source materials; research methods; the potential for exploring new questions. They were clearly aware of the new national and international possibilities for collaborative research, and the opportunities for bringing their work to a wider international audience.

*Collaborative research:* academic staff interviewed who were/are research collaborators with AFF expressed similar enthusiasms and had similar reflections on the experience of and potential for new perspectives, methods and directions. They also voiced two strongly felt concerns – as had the post-doctoral fellows to a more limited extent. These were: (1) that AFF is over-stretched with too many commitments for too few staff, with consequent pressure on deadlines; (2) longer term sustainability of AFF, partly because of their desire to plan for further projects, and partly because of the time and energy they had already committed to collaborative projects with AFF.

*External partner (Irish Film Archive):* very positive about the experience of working with AFF and about future possibilities, and reference made to the possible move of archive materials to NUIM.

*Academic departments:* the response from all those interviewed was enthusiasm for what has been achieved and for the strategic significance of AFF and what it may achieve in the future, not only on its own account but more important what it can help the Faculty and the Institution as a whole to achieve. Similarly there were concerns that ways must be found to ensure the longer term sustainability of the institute.

*Service and Support departments:* there was particularly enthusiastic endorsement of AFF from this group, with the conviction expressed that AFF is already acknowledged as *the* leading digital humanities group in Ireland, along with great pride in the effect this has on the standing of NUIM. There was very strong commitment to continuing collaboration and to developing new ways to collaborate with AFF, including exploration of new ways to interact, e.g. joint appointments and/or secondments.

*AFF Staff:* A strong sense of commitment came through in the conversations, along with concern about the pressures of too many projects and commitments for a group with limited resources. There was particular concern about the difficulties arising from the lack of expected contribution from the Project Officer post, exacerbated by the long period of sick leave, along with relieved anticipation at the prospect of being able to recruit someone new. There was similar concern about the necessity of having a part-time Executive Assistant to cover for maternity leave. The additional loads appear to have been shared in some measure between the Director, Associate Director and Technology Officer, with the latter, not surprisingly, being especially affected by the absence of the Project Officer.

### **3. Response to Self-assessment**

Since much of this report relates to various aspects of the Self-Assessment Report, this section is limited to brief comments on particular issues presented in the report, following its main sections.

#### *1 Introduction and Background*

The creation of a research institute that places humanities computing at the heart of a broader grouping of institutional research strengths shows strategic imagination that is far from usual. (SAR I.6 p.6)

Similarly, the commitments to dissemination within the scholarly community and beyond, to supporting 'diverse linguistic scholarship' in relation to Irish studies and the study of 'Ireland's multiculturalism', and giving priority to 'the needs of early career researchers and of graduate students' project an ambitious but strategically coherent set of objectives. (SAR I.6 p.6)

The role of AFF in the national consortium 'Humanities Serving Irish Society' is clearly important as a framework within which AFF has been able to demonstrate particular leadership. (SAR I.5 p.5)

## II. Organisation, Management, Governance, and Funding

The very clear imbalance between the role descriptions of the Project Officer and the Technology Officer highlight the problems associated with the former post mentioned above, including the long period of absence for illness. From the role description, backed up by conversation, it is clear that the Technology Officer has a greater degree of pressure than is desirable, for all the commitment and ability so clearly demonstrated, and it is to be hoped that the recruitment of a new Project Officer will help to address the imbalance. (SAR II.1 pp. 8-9)

The part-time cover for maternity leave in the Executive Assistant position has clearly also played a part in the additional pressure on AFF staff, in particular the Director and Associate Director. (SAR II.1 p.10)

Funding for Post-Doctoral and Doctoral Fellows has clearly been an important factor in the development of AFF to date, and in its establishing itself in the digital humanities nationally and internationally. This is not only because a body of serious work is built up, but also in the engagement of a range of humanities disciplines within the institution, not least in the doctoral research supervisors. Similarly, the institutional support for the semester secondment scheme for Research Fellows is a far-sighted development that will undoubtedly pay dividends to NUIM over the years to come. (SAR II.1 p.10)

The reviewer has some concerns about the composition of the International Advisory Board, particularly the absence of humanities computing/digital humanities specialists. It appears this Board is not fully in operation as yet, and is likely to have a great deal to offer by way of advice and support. (SAR II.2 p.11)

The reviewer also has concerns about the apparent frequency and length of meetings. Given the complex inter-relationships and inter-actions to be managed, internally and externally, and especially in the early years of establishing the activity, it is inevitable that a greater than average number of meetings is likely to be required, but with the small number of staff in AFF the time involved makes it more difficult to deal with the many other demands. In planning the next stage of development of AFF, it may be worthwhile to consider whether the meeting schedule could be rationalised to some extent. (II.5 p.13)

The reviewer is also concerned about various aspects of dissemination. For example, the website and newsletters are not up to date. This is readily acknowledged as a problem by AFF and is quite understandable given the loss of resource in the Project Officer and Executive Assistant posts, which would have key responsibilities in this area. At the same time, these are part of the public face of AFF and as a result tend to have a disproportional significance. (II.5 p.13)

The Summer Intern programme is interesting and commendable, likely to be of value both to AFF and to the Computer Science department, as well as providing very good experience for the interns themselves. (II.5 p.14)

### *III Research and Scholarship*

The commitment to digital scholarship in the Humanities and in support of the Humanities is fundamental to the success AFF has already achieved. Particularly in an institution such as NUIM which has valuable source materials, there is a temptation to embark on 'digitisation only' projects, in which the digitisation is the primary aim - in some cases the only aim. The AFF (and NUIM) commitment to scholarship as the primary aim is most welcome. The number and range of research projects in which AFF is involved is extremely impressive, as are the methods that are being used. (SAR III)

The range of research projects and research collaborators in which AFF is involved is highly impressive. It is clear that in several cases there are problems that require a considerable degree of innovation in the way they are tackled, e.g. the particular challenges faced in digitising, and the developing a digital edition, of the Morpeth Scroll. What is particularly impressive in each case is the basic approach, which is to meet the source materials and the scholarly questions to be asked on their own terms, and then to address how existing or new technology developments may be used or engineered to meet the challenges (rather than starting with the idea that 'we have the technology' and 'we will find a way to fit the research to the technology'). This is the hallmark of serious digital scholarship in the Humanities. The development as part of this research of the Imaging Laboratory and imaging techniques such as Manuscript Hyperspectral Analysis means the innovation required in one project can be made available to new projects, and at the same time expertise and infrastructure is developed that can also be used as a basis for commercial activity and is likely to be attractive to a number of academic and commercial enterprises outside the institution. (SAR III.2 pp.15-21)

The new building is seen by all concerned, both within and outside AFF, as a major step forward, not only from a number of practical points of view, but also in how AFF is perceived. (SAR III.3 p.21)

AFF success in generating funds is impressive, but is obviously associated with concerns about the current absence of long-term funding for a critical mass of core expertise that will be needed if AFF is to build as effectively as it might on the excellent start it has made. (SAR III.4 pp.21-22)

Beyond the innovative research projects, the active engagement in and promotion of the programmes of workshops and seminars indicates clearly a highly research-active group. (SAR III.6 pp.24-25)

Since digital humanities is fundamentally collaborative, it is not surprising that internal and external collaborations feature in the AFF profile, and are playing a significant role in AFF's standing within NUIM, in Ireland and internationally. The impact made by AFF both nationally and internationally over a short period of time is particularly noteworthy, and represents both strategic intent and a great deal of hard work. (SAR III.4 pp.26-29)

The PhD programme is interesting for the range of disciplines covered, and commendable for its emphasis on collaboration with Computer Science. It is to be hoped that as AFF develops, it will become possible to develop additional capacity for joint supervision between the student's 'home discipline' and AFF staff. This will be important not only from a practical point of view, but also in terms of opportunities for (scholarly) career development for the AFF staff involved. (SAR V.1 p.30)

The undergraduate modules are well structured, with good content, and from the limited feedback from two students they appear to be well managed and well taught. (SAR V.2 pp.31-32)

The new MA in Digital Humanities appears very promising. The content is well thought-out, and the emphasis on methods, modeling and metadata will provide a sound basis for the other work envisaged, including the project/thesis. In structure and content the MA readily stands comparison with the best on offer anywhere in the world. (SAR V.3 pp.32-34)

The compulsory Generic Skills module for incoming doctoral students is well constructed, and should offer invaluable opportunities to the new students - and their supervisors. (SAR V.7 pp.35-36)

## *VI. Relation to Institutional and National Strategies*

It is clear from the SAR and from statements made by senior university officers that AFF was set up and has been supported for a number of long-term strategic reasons. The suggested AFF contributions to NUIM strategic goals going forward look ambitious, but achievable in the light of achievements to date. (SAR VI.2 pp. 38-39)

The national developments in and support for digital humanities in Ireland over the past few years has been remarkable, and have provided opportunities that NUIM and AFF have been quick to exploit – very successfully – in a number of areas. The SAR might usefully have cross referred also to infrastructure strategy and development in the USA, Canada and Australia, e.g. in particular *Our Cultural Commonwealth* - the report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences, published in 2006. (The AFF staff are no doubt well aware of these wider developments, but specific cross-references in the SAR may be instructive and helpful for a wider readership.) (SAR VI.3 & VI.4 pp.40-42)

The embedding of AFF within the Faculty of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy has been a key objective of all concerned, within AFF and outside, and there has clearly been good progress, with a number of departments engaged with AFF at various levels – Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Fellows, Research Fellows, etc – and with strong backing from department and faculty heads. There is some concern about those departments not yet engaged with AFF, and about whether there is sufficient depth in the engagements already in place – i.e. the number of staff who are not engaged and possibly unaware of what engagement might have to offer. AFF and its Management Board appear to be aware and concerned, and continue to develop ideas on how to extend both the breadth and depth of engagement. This is another area where the limited resources available to AFF is an issue, but at the same time this kind of change in institutional culture inevitably takes time to develop, and an increasing range of successful research projects allied with the commitments to training and to young scholars are likely to be most effective in increasing the awareness and interest across the institution. (SAR VII.2 p.44)

Continuity in the management of AFF was raised by a number of people, with strong views expressed in particular about the desirability of continuing with the current Director and Associate Director. Both expressed their wish and willingness to continue in their present roles. (SAR VII.4 p.46)

The exercise to carry out a 'mid-point' self assessment of research quality, using the basic methodology of the UK's Research Assessment Exercise 2008 and the performance indicators of the Royal Irish Academy (2009) is both interesting and commendable., as is the goal of achieving an overall 4\* rating in a further three years. It would be impossible for an external reviewer on a very short visit to make any substantive comment on the 'results', but they come across as reasonable and conservative. They leave a great deal to strive for over the next three years, but provide a range of specific targets, against which performance and progress can continue to be measured. (SAR VII.5 pp.46-53)

One specific concern is in relation to publications. The range, content and quality of AFF's work in the collaborative research projects is such that publication in relevant print and online (peer-reviewed) journals is highly desirable, not only to gain appropriate credit for AFF and the staff involved, but also in order to ensure that this work is brought to the attention of the wider digital humanities community. The opportunity is there for much more than has been done to date. It is understandable that in a context of severe pressures on time, in part related to the ever-growing demand and in part to the resource issues already referred to, it has been very difficult to carve out the time for the required reflection and writing to be done, but it should be a priority in considering even the short-term development of AFF. (SAR VII.5 p. 47-48)



The success of AFF in the national and international arenas has already received favourable comment. The emphasis on developing European collaborations is likely to be of particular importance. (SAR VII.8 p.55)

The challenges of future funding and institutional sustainability are well articulated. (SAR VII.9 pp. 55-56)

#### *VIII An Foras Feasa and the Future*

This section provides a useful summary of priorities and challenges. The development of a Strategic Plan and Business Plan, allied to the move to the new building later in 2010, are likely to provide a framework and focus for NUIM to review its strategic commitment to the digital humanities and assess the requirements for sustainability of AFF. The outcome of PRTL Cycle 5 is clearly of some significance for the immediate future. (SAR VIII pp.57-59)

#### **4. Conclusions**

At the outset of the external review, two key questions were posed: 'Is what AFF does valuable?'; and 'How good is it?'. On the basis of the review process, the answers to both questions appear to be clear and positive. The value of what AFF has achieved to date is evident across a range of activities, but the real value of what it does and what it represents is to do with the future of digital scholarship in the institution, especially in the Faculty, and its strategic importance for NUIM. The quality of its achievements to date is noteworthy even when judged by the highest international standards – and neither AFF nor NUIM would wish anything less – and in spite of the resource difficulties related to the Project Officer and Executive Assistant posts discussed in the SAR and above.

There is clear evidence that the work of AFF is highly valued by research partners at all levels in NUIM from highly distinguished scholars to the Doctoral Fellows, and that the quality of the work done and the support provided by AFF is recognised within NUIM and by research partners outside.

It is also very clear, both from the conversations during the review and from the extensive documentation provided, that AFF has benefited very significantly from the strategic, imaginative and resourceful leadership of the Director and Associate Director.

It is undoubtedly through their leadership, for example, that AFF has made such a significant impression in the international digital humanities community, through international collaboration and through its engagement with the international conferences. This is all the more remarkable in view of the short time AFF has existed. The Introduction to this report included a section describing the digital humanities as it exists internationally. AFF ticks almost all the boxes in its ethos, aims and objectives, and in its activities and achievements to date, and is very well placed for further development, particularly in relation to digital humanities as a new discipline area.

Impact on other scholarly communities is outside the competence of the reviewer to judge, although it received favourable comment during the review. The integration within the Institute, however, of the four strands of Digital Humanities, Multiculturalism and Multilingualism, Ireland and Europe, and Cultural Heritage and Social Capital is itself strategically significant, and NUIM surely stands to benefit significantly over the longer term from this innovative development, with AFF a continuing catalyst for innovation in research and teaching.

The creation and development of AFF has owed a great deal to the strategic vision of NUIM and success in gaining strategic investment from the Irish Government's PRTL Cycle 4 programme. The rate of future development of AFF is likely to depend in

significant part on the PRTL Cycle 5 submission. At the same time, longer term planning to ensure core sustainability seeks to avoid reliance on national funding of this kind, while taking advantage of any that may be available.

AFF appears well positioned to plan on the basis of a very diverse funding model. In addition to any strategic investment made by NUIM itself, there are likely to be income streams for teaching, research and commercial activity. AFF is engaged in a wide variety of teaching activities and is due to take on more, from undergraduate through MA to PhD, and also including certificate and generic skills modules, plus a range of training courses. It is not clear whether revenue is associated with these activities or whether this would be consistent with wider NUIM policy. A second stream is externally funded research, in which AFF has been remarkably successful to date, and which is important as a continuing source of research challenges and development. The EU has already been identified as a particularly appropriate area for future exploitation. A third stream is commercialisation or revenue generation. AFF's particular expertise in digitisation and in a range of applied computer science methods relevant to the humanities make it well suited to offer consultancy and training, as well as a range of other services. The most immediate target is likely to be the cultural heritage sector, but digitisation and the exploitation and management of digital information is of growing interest and concern in the commercial sector.

During the review visit, the Director and Associate Director were invited to produce a SWOT analysis of AFF, which will be used for internal planning and discussion. The reviewer's informal SWOT analysis follows, having taken into account some of the factors and issues raised in that document. The objective with these points is to be illustrative rather than comprehensive.

#### *Particular Strengths*

- systematic integration of applied computer science with the humanities disciplines;
- commitment to the priority of the research questions of the humanities, going well beyond any concept of 'digitisation only' or for its own sake;
- development of significant expertise and capacity in digitisation across a wide range of resource types;
- a strong collaborative ethos, recognising and valuing the contributions that each partner has to offer;
- a strong commitment to develop understanding and skill in the methods of applied computer science to empower humanities scholars to undertake new challenges;
- emphasis on methodology and extensibility (while recognising the importance of tools and techniques);
- commitment to open international standards;
- expertise in and development of systems to manage digital repositories.

#### *Weaknesses*

- loss of resource in relation to the Project Officer and Executive Assistant posts;
- the associated fragility arising from a limited resource base, with increased pressure on staff in relation to project deadlines, routine work, new initiatives, and personal development;
- the pressures have limited the research publications to some extent, which is a pity given the quality of what is being achieved.

#### *Threats*

- internal pressures from a developing mismatch between demands and resources;

- financial pressures (which are of course global, national, and sector-wide as well as institutional)
- the competitive nature of international developments in digital scholarship in the Humanities and in digital infrastructure, which means that standing and positions of leadership can decline in relative terms.

### *Opportunities*

- the move to the new building offers a number of exciting near-term opportunities. The plans and commitment to make it an open and welcoming space, and to make use of screens to portray examples of AFF activities and collaborations are particularly interesting;
- consolidating its position as a catalyst for institutional change within NUIM, as a driver of increasing awareness of and skills in humanities digital scholarship;
- a leading role in digital humanities nationally and internationally (and according to comments made during the review this may apply equally to Irish Studies);
- an increasing range of national and international collaborations in research and teaching;
- develop and support repositories and repository management infrastructure not only to support AFF/NUIM projects, but also those of other institutions;
- commercial exploitation in the cultural heritage and commercial sectors, in particular in relation to digitisation expertise, but also such areas as text/data mining, text encoding and metadata, resource integration, etc.

The suggestion was made during the review by one of AFF's collaborators that it had already established itself as 'a jewel in the crown' of NUIM. The reviewer is in no position to make a judgment, but the potential is clearly there for an accolade of this kind to be made, in the future if not immediately.

## **5. Recommendations**

In the light of the very positive character of the review, it is perhaps inevitable that a number of the recommendations are in fact endorsements of existing plans and policies. Some of these are nevertheless included in order to provide a balanced set of recommendations (although the absence of current plans or policies in the set of recommendations does not imply disagreement with them).

1. Continuing and further steps to embed AFF in the Faculty and the Institution should have the highest priority. The move to the new building offers particular opportunities in this regard, but it is important that resources are found for related outreach activities to ensure that awareness and interest across the Faculty is systematically cultivated.
2. Among the institutional implications of further embedding of AFF in the Faculty are possible funding possibilities, e.g. contributions from departments in recognition of existing or anticipated collaborative benefits. In one institutional model, an element of research overheads is taken as a 'tax' on 'home' departments so that the element due to AFF would be boosted in recognition of its infrastructural role. It is in any case important that AFF's contributions to collaborative research projects, and to teaching, are appropriately recognised.
3. There is potential for imaginative approaches to the further embedding of AFF in the wider institution, in particular in relation to the Service and Support departments, where the possibilities of shared posts and short-term secondments were suggested.

4. Other models for internal funding of core positions are also under investigation. It is important that the final model should take account of AFF's need for stable and sustainable management and also for a critical mass of core expertise in applied computer science and in digital humanities, recognising both the opportunities and requirements of digital scholarship and also the career development needs of the digital humanities specialists who will instantiate this critical mass.
5. The development of the critical mass is likely to be a somewhat longer term goal, but among the benefits to the Faculty and the Institution will be increased opportunities for externally funded research projects and the development of new teaching programmes, as well as greater capacity and flexibility in exploiting commercial opportunities. In relation to this, one appropriate approach might be joint appointments between AFF and departments in the Faculty.
6. In relation to this, the review strongly endorses the aspirations expressed in the SAR for development towards a lectureship/senior lectureship in digital humanities and in due course a Chair. (SAR VII.4 p.59) In part this is related also to issues of career development and progression, which will be important if AFF/NUIM is to retain key staff as its capabilities and standing develop.
7. Related to this, in turn, is the prospect of a core of AFF staff capable of joint supervision of PhD research with 'home' department staff, and the accompanying recommendation that an objective is set that over time this should become the 'norm' or at least quite common for Doctoral Fellows in AFF.
8. It is important to extend the composition of the International Advisory Board to include one or more digital humanities specialists, and to engage with the Board in a more proactive way, as is planned.
9. The review strongly endorses the continuing commitments to: (a) prioritising the needs of young scholars; (b) research collaborations across the institution; (c) national and international collaborations and engagements.
10. The view that the development of European collaboration and funding merits particular attention is strongly endorsed.
11. Opportunities for commercial exploitation of consultancy and training, as well as project collaboration, are ripe for more immediate development, although some additional resource may be required initially to support this.
12. Particular attention needs to be given to communicating AFF activities and demonstrating 'evidence of value' in the work carried out. This is to be expected for any new activity, especially one operating in a new discipline area, but makes it all the more important. The following specific recommendations are well understood by AFF, but resources and prioritisation are needed to ensure they are followed up:
  - to keep the website and newsletters up to date;
  - to develop a framework and strategy for developing examples of use of the various resources under (and after) construction, in particular examples of how the resource may be used in research;
  - to develop related strategies for keeping resource development websites active – e.g. a monthly 'xxx of the month', where 'xxx' is something relevant, such as 'person of the month' for a prosopographical resource;
  - to ensure time for reflection and writing, so that a high level of scholarly publication is maintained;

- to pursue a strategy of joint publications with research partners, in order to address and illustrate issues associated with modes of collaborative research, which is still rather new in the Humanities.

13. The planned developments of a Strategic Plan and Business Plan are clearly important in ensuring clarity about the future of AFF.

## **6. Comments on review methodology**

The notion of 'quality promotion' is much to be preferred to 'quality assurance', expressing clearly the aim of providing practical assistance to the assessed group to develop and adopt best practice. The methodology for the Complementary Quality Reviews appears to be well developed and coherent, and the requirements of the external reviewer were clearly set out.

There were two concerns felt by the external reviewer, with suggestions they be considered for future reviews:

- a. it would have been useful to have a little more time with the internal reviewer, and indeed it might have been valuable if more of the review process had involved both the external and internal reviewers. (It is acknowledged, at the same time, that at least some of those people interviewed might have been less 'open' in the presence of a senior member of the university management.)
- b. it would have been useful to have a little more time with the Director and Associate Director of AFF, in order to follow up on points of clarification.

All those to whom the external reviewer spoke were very engaged and willing to talk and to answer questions. Throughout the reviewer was treated with exemplary kindness and courtesy. Thanks are due to all who were involved, and especially to staff in the Quality Promotion office, who made all the arrangements and oversaw the timetable with great efficiency, flexibility and tact.

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*Report ends*

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***Professor Harold Short***  
***External Reviewer***

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***Professor Ray O'Neill***  
***Internal Reviewer***