



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ólúscail na hÉireann Mhó Nuad

Quality Review of the Department of Ancient Classics February 2010

Peer Review Report

Peer Review Group:

External Reviewers:

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Internal Reviewers:

**Professor Rowena Pecchenino,
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Peer Review Report

prepared by

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in consultation with the Internal Reviewers

1. Introduction

The Department of Ancient Classics at Maynooth is a highly impressive unit. The external reviewers were struck by the unity of the staff, both permanent and temporary, their sense of purpose, and above all by the commitment shown to the core tasks of teaching and research. Students, for their part, consistently emphasized the approachability of the staff, their enthusiasm, and the 'family-like' atmosphere created by staff for students within the department.

1.1 Teaching

The range of courses taught at both UG and MA level is quite remarkable - considering the size of the department - encompassing literature (both Greek and Roman), history, philosophy, late antiquity and early Christianity, the reception of the Classical world, plus - of course - the core mission of any department of Classics, the teaching of the ancient languages from beginners to the most advanced stages of achievement. Many departments twice the size of Maynooth Ancient Classics could not boast such an impressive range.

1.2 Research

Likewise remarkable is the strength and depth of the research produced by the members of staff in terms of articles and books published with journals and presses of international standing. Arguably the rate and quality of production equal or outpace the norms expected in a UK department of Classics, where regular research productivity is an enforced contractual obligation.

1.3. 2008-9 Self Assessment Report and 2004-5 External Report

The clarity and openness of the 'Self-Assessment Report', produced in good time by the department in preparation for the review process, contributed immeasurably to the ease with which the review could be conducted by the external visitors. Doubtless the bulk of the responsibility for producing this document and its lengthy set of detailed appendices fell on the Head of Department, Dr McGroarty. We are very grateful to him for his labours both here and indeed more generally throughout our visit. Likewise helpful were the clear

set of Quality Review Guidelines produced by the University. It also became quickly apparent both from the department's Self-Assessment report and from the review process itself that the document produced in the aftermath of the 2004-5 inspection by Professors McGing and Cairns had – in effect – already done the job of the present reviewers in advance. For the staff at Maynooth have clearly already done the hard work of thinking through the implications of the throughgoing 2004-5 report, and have implemented the main recommendations of that report both quickly and effectively. As a result, the principle recommendations of the present report represent suggestions for fine-tuning what is already a successful, creative and innovative operation.

Like our predecessors in 2004-5 we were very well housed and richly entertained both by the department and the university, and we would like to offer sincere thanks to all those colleagues who made our stay such a comfortable and productive one.

2. Recruitment of undergraduates

An important issue which was flagged up in the departmental report is the drop in numbers of first-year undergraduates taking Greek and Roman Civilisation in the years 2008-2009 and 2009-10 (*Self-Assessment Report*, p. 42). Two years' figures do not in themselves constitute a trend, and next year may reverse this decline, but the situation bears watching, as the Department are acutely aware. The numbers keeping the subject on in the second and third year remain roughly constant (so the Department is in fact keeping an increasing proportion of those it teaches in first year). The first year courses are not at fault; they seem to us well-judged and attractive, and this impression is reinforced by the steady retention rate. The constant impression we were given by the students to whom we spoke was that outside pressures are at work here: in a recession, subjects which are perceived to be of more practical application are favoured. They would in fact like to take more Classics than they dare. The fact that Classical Civilisation is not widely taught in Irish schools, and that therefore Greek and Roman Civilisation can only with difficulty count as a 'teaching subject' seems to

be the most decisive factor in the drop in numbers. We therefore suggest that the department focus the renewed marketing drive it rightly proposes on convincing prospective students that a Classics degree can take them in a number of different directions. There are extensive statistics available from the UK Council of University Classics Departments about the employability of Classicists; and Maynooth's Alumni office may also be able to help determine the employment destinations of graduates of the department.

3. Modular structure

We consider that there are also ways in which the institution could act at Faculty level to help this Department and others. During the course of our review process it became increasingly clear to us that the Arts Faculty is modularised in name only. A tortuously Byzantine system of regulations currently restricts what the student may or may not take. Indeed, there appeared to us to be a high level of confusion among the students about what the rules actually were. This is unsurprising given that each subject pathway appears to have different restrictions, some of them very surprising and pedagogically undesirable. There now pertains a situation where some departments in the Faculty reportedly have a student:staff ratio of 40:1, and others, who are anxious to do more, are coming under pressure because their numbers are falling. We therefore consider that as a matter of urgency the Faculty should consider co-listing courses so that students are able to take more modules outside their main chosen pathway. It is of course a matter for discussion at Faculty level exactly how many credits should be taken within the subject pathway and how many should be elective; but we consider that a simpler and more flexible system generally, and one which applied to all departments equally, would be likely to improve the student experience immeasurably. We also suspect it would improve the numbers in some Classics modules (though of course Classics students would also be free to take modules from outside Classics); and we further consider it pedagogically highly desirable that modules in Classical history and culture should be available to those reading subjects for which such knowledge is fundamental, such as English and History. We understand that there is in fact a precedent for co-

listing a course in Philosophy and German, namely *Philosophy Into Literature*. We note that the 2004-5 Classics Peer Review Report made a not dissimilar recommendation (pp. 14-5), concluding: ‘full use of the potential of modular structure could make [the] centrality [of the Classics tradition in the Humanities] a practical reality in the university curriculum.’ We hope that when the Faculty is reviewed as a whole, the call to embrace modularisation more enthusiastically (which need not mean indiscriminately) will be taken extremely seriously by all departments.

4. Teaching and Learning

4.1 Language Teaching

The commitment of the department to the core mission of teaching the ancient languages ought to be singled out for particular praise. Considerable time and effort are devoted by staff to promoting the effective learning of Latin and Greek. Particularly impressive is the amount of time devoted to the elementary stages of language acquisition, where the student must attend five classes a week. Few UK departments of Classics, for example, could equal the demands and effort involved here. Not unrelated is the rarity of failure in elementary language classes at Maynooth. One of the present reviewers teaches in a department of Classics where a failure rate of 20% in elementary Latin or Greek is regarded as ‘normal’.

Two areas for fine tuning can be identified elsewhere within the curriculum currently offered.

4.2 Small Group Teaching

Up until relatively recently, and as in noted in the 2004-5 report, the Department of Ancient Classics endured teaching loads of up to 15 hours per week (e.g. in ‘tutorial’ weeks). Such teaching loads were an impediment to effective delivery of teaching by overloaded and overworked staff. Clearly the Department has worked hard to rationalize the curriculum so as to combine the effective deployment of teaching resources while still maintaining an excellent range of courses (see further below). However, in the course of this process of

rationalization, sight has perhaps been lost of the importance of small group teaching at levels 2 and 3. Small group teaching is certainly still well maintained at level 1, but at levels 2 and 3 has been largely replaced by a limited number of 'workshops' which include the whole lecture class in a single interactive session. There are undoubted merits to the workshop system. However, the Department has recently been giving serious consideration to the reintroduction of small group teaching at levels 2 and 3. This development is strongly to be encouraged, since it is often only within small group tutorials or seminars that teachers can assess the extent of the class's engagement with the course content, and that students can work through some of their most pressing concerns in relation to key issues raised by content delivered in lectures. Of course, upon reintroduction of small group teaching, the Department will encounter the same obstacles which no doubt provoked the abandonment of tutorials in the first place, namely that – despite express student preference for small group teaching – students have an abysmal record of attendance at these sessions. This problem might perhaps be partially solved by tying tutorials to our second recommendation in this section on Teaching and Learning, namely the systematic re-introduction of compulsory coursework.

4.3 Compulsory Coursework

The submission of coursework is currently optional within the Department until a single compulsory essay unit is encountered in final year. Otherwise, students may submit essays as part of a course-unit, but the marks from these essays will only be taken into account if they are higher than the mark achieved in the final exam for the same course-unit. Students testify to the great detail and helpfulness of the feedback received for these optional essays. But it is also apparent that take-up of the essay option is low. The Department has again been giving serious thought to the reintroduction of compulsory essays, and we would strongly endorse this development, since conversations with a range of undergraduate students made it clear to the reviewers that the student body would welcome this move. The form this element of assessment should take (3 short pieces or 1 long essay?) and the valuation accorded to it (20% of the final mark, or 40%?) is of course a matter for the Department to determine. But the

pedagogical benefits of the reintroduction of essays are clear. As suggested earlier, tying small-group teaching specifically to preparation for and advice essay work might be one way of motivating students to attend tutorials more regularly. We are the more convinced that the re-introduction of compulsory coursework is desirable because at present the only compulsory form of assessment in all undergraduate modules (with the exception of the Essay Project in the third year) is a 1.5 hour examination. 1.5 hours is not long and the department might give some consideration to opting for longer exams (2 hours if not 3) even in addition to the compulsory coursework.

4.4 Attendance

The issue of attendance is worth raising more formally in this connection. In universities all over the world, poor student attendance at classes is a problem. In Maynooth the issue clearly bothers staff and students within Ancient Classics alike. Local measures – such as marks for attendance and contribution – have not galvanised the more reluctant students or improved their patterns of attendance. Perhaps the problem is best dealt with at Faculty level, where a clear set of consequences for poor attendance might be articulated and publicized. Attendance is related to student performance, and so goes to the heart of any university's mission.

4.5 BA course design

This is an area where we wish to register our admiration. As noted above, the first year courses are attractive and cover the essential areas of the Classical World; they also lead well into the second year courses, which in turn prepare the student for the more specialised third year courses. So, for example, a student who remains within Classics experiences a valuable progression from a first-year module on *Myth and Poetry in Early Greece*, to a more specific second year module with a reception aspect on *The Fall of Troy: the Iliad Through the Ages* to a third year module on *The Aeneid and the Story of Roman Epic*; on the historical side in the first year *From Polis to Empire* prepares the student well for *Thucydides, Aristophanes and the Peloponnesian War* in Year 2 and this in turn leads naturally into *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Macedonia and Alexander the*

Great in the final year. There is a very good balance of the mainstream and the more exotic (such as *The Philosophy of Love and Friendship in the Ancient World*, *The Ancient Novel*, and *Strange Creatures: Anthropology in Antiquity*), and we both felt this was an area where the department had achieved a nicely balanced and enticing curriculum. The students also appreciated it, and confirmed that connections are drawn between the modules they study. Above all it is clear that staff are not confining their teaching to their research specialisms, but are making an effort to teach courses which will both appeal to students and broaden their intellectual horizons. Were a more flexible version of modularisation to exist, this course arrangement would certainly encourage some to choose their modules entirely from within Classics; at the same time the third year subjects are sufficiently independent not to require the second year modules as prerequisites. Some of the existing modules would appeal very specifically to students in other subjects, and would enhance their learning in their home discipline.

4.6 MA course design

This also seems to be working very well. Although a two year MA is unusual, it is actually a very good idea for those intending to continue on to PhD level, especially if they have either only one, or (more common) no Classical language. The MA courses are again an interesting mixture of the more familiar and the less obvious (e.g. *Literature and Learning of the 2nd century AD: Apuleius and his Contemporaries*, *Ancient Wisdom Literature: the Didactic Poetry of the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*, *Lives of the Early Saints*), and follow on well from the undergraduate degree (e.g. *The Hellenistic Age* relates well to the third year module *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Macedonia and Alexander the Great*). Although the assessment load seems quite heavy in comparison with some MA degrees, the students we talked to had no problem with what they were asked to do. It is not surprising that there are increasing numbers of home grown MA students, and it is highly probable that the department's record of PhD capture will continue to develop from this excellent base. It should be noted here that in Britain and Ireland, numbers of MA and PhD students have historically been

rather low outside the two centres of Oxford and Cambridge. That situation has begun to change only in the last ten years, particularly in the last five.

4.7 Response to External Examiners and Anonymous marking

The Self-Assessment Report rightly stresses the Department's responsiveness to the previous Peer Review Report in 2004-5 and to the comments of its external examiners. The documentation shows the department to be extremely willing to adopt the suggestions of externals, even when the undertaking of significant extra workload is involved (e.g. adopting second marking and moderation at the request of the external examiner). We note that at present the University as a whole does not use anonymous exam marking; this is something beyond the remit of the department, but we would recommend that the University as a whole should consider adopting it.

5. Research

5.1 Quality of Research

Despite the absence of the large stick that is the UK's RAE, the Department has, as noted earlier, been maintaining a quality and a quantity of production that would ensure a good performance in any RAE. It is notable, for example, that every permanent member of staff has produced a monograph in recent years, and with internationally recognized presses or publishing houses (e.g. Duckworth, University of California Press, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, etc.). As in many cognate areas in the Arts (but unlike many science disciplines), the monograph rather than the journal article represents the most prestigious type of publication. Despite this – and the presence of the RAE – it is not true of either of the reviewers' own departments that all members of staff have published a monograph. This is one indication that, in terms of research, the Department of Ancient Classics at Maynooth punches well above its weight. Indeed, thanks to some inspired appointments among more junior staff in recent years, the department is well on its way to achieving a presence on the international stage as a centre of research excellence. External confirmation of the high quality of staff research in recent years has come from two sources. The

first stems from the number of highly competitive IRCHSS awards gained by staff (3 in recent years); the second from the appointment of two staff from the department to Chairs elsewhere (Mark Humphries to Swansea and Michael Clarke to Galway). Given the loss of these two high-calibre researchers it was imperative that the Department replace them with staff of similar quality, and all the signs are that this has been achieved.

5.2 Research Leave

The research achievements of the Department are all the more remarkable given that there is no formalised internal research leave scheme. At present the only opportunities for staff leave are those of oversubscribed external schemes (such as IRCHSS) or a somewhat unattractive university scheme involving a sacrifice of 30-35% of one's salary. Clearly this is a scheme designed only for plutocrats. In this context we recommend that the Department consider the introduction of an internal sabbatical rota of one semester's leave on a sequential basis. Such a scheme would require that all staff members teach more hours per week than at present, and it might be that the distribution of administrative tasks might have to be rethought (see further below). But the payoff would be that the extra hours worked would cover the teaching of one colleague on leave for one semester. If the scheme operated in such a way that one colleague was on leave in each semester according to a strict rota, then staff members could look forward to a semester's research leave as of right in every 4th year – and at no cost to the university.

5.3 The Library

Owing to constraints of time, we did not both have the opportunity to visit the library on this occasion. However it is clear that the collection, while limited in some respects, has its strengths, some of which are germane to the research interests of staff and the ug and pg courses taught in the department, such as patristics and Late Antiquity. It is also clear that there is a positive acquisitions policy and that the collection continues to improve. For research purposes it can in any case be supplemented by visits to Dublin libraries. The staff in the library were singled out for particular praise for their courtesy and helpfulness.

5.4 PhD capture

We consider that the department's record of PhD capture is very impressive given its small staff numbers and the lack of internal university funding for PhDs.

6. Service

Those in the University are best-placed to appreciate the department's service to the institution; we wish to record our particular admiration for the department's service to Classics in Ireland and the UK. The last Peer Review Report rated this aspect of the department's activities as 'unusually high', and we can only agree. This is, moreover, a tradition of service which has been continuous for nearly twenty years in one reviewer's personal memory, and reflects great credit on the institution as a whole.

7. Management and Leadership

The department is evidently a very happy ship as well as a very tight one: the most often echoed comment which emerged from our interviews with staff was 'I like working here.' This included temporary staff, and informal enquiry made of previous temporary staff now in other institutions confirmed this favourable impression. It is by no means universal for temporary staff to feel such affection for a department where they have been employed for a fixed period, so this is an impressive tribute to the collegiality and fairness with which the department functions.

More than one student paid tribute to how well organised the department is (if you have a question, they know the answer, as one said). Another described the atmosphere as 'like a family'. The materials given to students are clear and comprehensible. The administrative burden falls heaviest on the Head of Department, who is Director of Undergraduate Studies as well; this very onerous dual role might be something the department could reconsider at a later time, perhaps when the Headship rotates again and some of the younger staff have been in post for longer.

The department is evidently extremely well served by its Senior Executive Assistant, who was warmly and universally praised by students and staff alike. Her excellence is the more striking in the face of a number of functions (notably the entering of exam data) having recently been devolved to the departments from the centre. The entry of such data is a very onerous task which requires immense concentration and a substantial time commitment; we urge the institution to consider whether hard-pressed departmental administration staff are the best people to have to undertake it in the face of the many other imperatives of a student-facing role.

8. Conclusion

This is a most impressive department. In every aspect of its activities, it punches well above its weight on the national and international stage. It maintains its core teaching mission admirably while continuing to produce excellent, indeed world-class, research at an impressive rate, and contributes generously to the classical and the wider community in Ireland and the UK. Some excellent appointments have been made of late; and all staff, whether of recent or long-standing appointment, display a can-do attitude, a yea-saying responsiveness, which is as rare as it is invaluable.

The department is very small in numbers. The previous Peer Review report made recommendations for further staffing, namely a material culture specialist and a language teacher, which were not followed by the university. In an ideal world we would concur with the previous reviewers that these would be the areas where expansion would be desirable, and we hope that in due course, when the economic climate improves, the university might reconsider the staffing position. But in the sublunary world we realise that this is unlikely to happen for some time. In the meantime we would hope to impress upon the university that its Classics department is a real asset, a highly motivated and talented team which reflects extremely well upon its home institution and achieves valuable and important results in terms of research outputs, student satisfaction and learning outcomes - what used to be called scholarly and

pedagogical merit. This is a department of style and class, which deserves to be supported to the hilt.

Summary of recommendations:

1. That the Department focus its proposed marketing drive on convincing prospective students that a Classics degree can take them in a number of different directions.
2. That the Faculty should consider co-listing Classics courses in second and third year – e.g. list a course as simultaneously both Classics and History (or English) - so that students are able to take more modules outside their main chosen pathway.
3. That the Department continue with its current line of thinking and reintroduce small group teaching at levels 2 and 3 (rather than the current system of full-house workshops).
4. The Department again continue with its current line of thinking and reintroduce compulsory essays for each course-unit at levels 2 and 3, and that it consider increasing the length of its examinations.
5. That the Faculty tackle the problem of student absenteeism from classes by articulating and publicizing a clear set of consequences for poor attendance.
6. That the Faculty / University introduce anonymous exam marking as standard for all courses.
7. That the Department should consider the introduction of an internal sabbatical rota of one semester's leave on a sequential basis.

8. That the university, when the economic position improves, should consider increasing the number of staff in the department by appointing a specialist in language teaching and in material culture.

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