

**DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MAYNOOTH**

QUALITY REVIEW 2008

QUALITY PEER REVIEW REPORT

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I THE DEPARTMENT

The Department of Anthropology has made considerable advances in its student numbers over the past ten years and is to be congratulated on this expansion. This growth has been recognised by the steady appointment of lecturers, most recently with the appointment of two new lecturers since the preparation of the self-assessment document. As a result, the department has grown substantially to embrace a larger degree of complexity in terms of student cohort, course variety and range of research interests. This is evidence of the success of the entrepreneurial spirit that has been, and still is, prevailing in the department. In a relatively short time, the department has established itself as one of the more dynamic anthropology departments in Europe. Collaborative links to other departments, at NUIM, nationally and internationally, have increased in number and have been strengthened. A combination of research programmes and opportunities for visiting staff ensure that the research activities of the department are vibrant and active. The department now has an increasing status in the international anthropological community as something of a hub in terms of its multi-disciplinary links.

Within this arena of student growth and research networking, the challenges of consolidating teaching and research objectives are held in tension with the changing dynamics of staff positions. The secondment of Professor Taylor to a three year post as Dean of International Education, the retirement of a senior staff member, and the arrival of three new staff in 2008-09 (two teaching, one research) means that a period of transition will be inevitable. It is therefore an opportune moment to reflect upon the future direction of the unit. The department has also successfully addressed the gender imbalance that was noted in the 2001 Quality Peer Review report as it currently has a ratio of four male to three female permanent staff members (not including Professor Taylor or the retiring staff member) with a new female temporary appointment commencing in January.

II TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

III(a) Curriculum Design Undergraduate

At undergraduate level, student satisfaction is evident in high levels of enthusiasm and praise for the design, content and delivery of lectures and tutorials as well as the professionalism and 'friendliness' of the staff of the department. In terms of course content, the modules offer a rich variety of anthropological themes and debates and the information provided is detailed and consistent in handbooks for each year. The service provided to students by staff is excellent and a lot of time is clearly spent advising students and ensuring the module details are accurate. The balance of courses is well maintained between those with anthropological theoretical grounding and modules of more specialist interest. There is a rich diversity of modules on offer through the programme which makes this an attractive complement of courses giving students ample choice. In this period of student growth and staff change, staff are to be commended for having created an expansive, diverse and enriching undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programme delivered professionally with goodwill and continued investment in the students.

Recommendation

Students raised some areas which they felt could operate more smoothly. These are:

- Additional information on skills and learning outcomes in their modules.
- Essay writing support. Writing across the curriculum was something almost everyone wanted to see included by the central support system. Mature students and return-to-education students in particular were singled out as needing the benefits of this.

- More systematic circulation of other kinds of information on lectures and events in the department.
- The need to resolve timetabling issues through clashes with increased module choices.

We would recommend these issues be given some further thought and clarification to enhance student learning experiences.

(b) Tutorials for the large number of first year students are managed each week by postgraduate tutors who also mark essays and exam papers. It is therefore appropriate and essential that the module coordinator is responsible for monitoring the marking across the module and advising and mentoring tutors in examination procedures, tutoring skills and essay standards. **This procedure should become standard for first year.** Generic tutorials are run by postgraduates for second and third year level students for six weeks in addition to their 24 lecture/seminar modules. **A similar system of advice and mentoring should be established for these tutors.** Overall, the undergraduate curriculum is well designed with an excellent range of choices for students.

(c) Administrative staff provide excellent backup for both staff and students within the constraints of their positions. However, with a large staff-student ratio and relatively low staff numbers including a series of new appointments, this has put strain on administrative staff to perform comfortably. In addition, an increasing number of students, means that academic staff are also juggling assignments and tasks to a greater extent each year. If postgraduate tutors and teaching staff levels are not maintained it will be difficult to continue to offer the current breadth of the programme whilst providing sufficient contact time with students on each of the modules. The increase in undergraduate numbers is also putting pressure on teaching spaces and concerns have been raised about increased teaching loads through the need for double lectures as video links offer only poor quality teaching. The difficulty of double lecturing can also affect timetabling.

(d) Student numbers are clearly affecting some staff who expressed concerns at large numbers of students in certain modules and were supportive of the possibility of capping modules. With increased course choice comes the added potential for replication between departments. Thus, there may be opportunities for the rationalization of teaching loads whilst maintaining diversity of choice by consolidating teaching links with staff in other departments who offer similar topic choices. However there is a need to be vigilant that such rationalization would not detract from student perceptions of their 'anthropology degree'. Where rationalizations of this kind are tested they should be monitored closely to ensure that they do not affect student preferences for anthropology in the longer term.

(e) Some staff expressed an interest in developing innovative teaching beyond the department which is to be supported and encouraged. This is already happening in areas such as Material Design and these courses and links require sustained effort and organization beyond the normal delivery of module offerings.

Recommendation

Developing external links for innovation and profiling of the course content can be time consuming. The department might consider ways of supporting and actively recognizing those who engage creatively to develop teaching links externally which also have the potential to improve undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment opportunities.

(f) The committee supports the department's forthcoming efforts in undergraduate recruitment. This is an area that could serve university investment well. However, the proper management and marketing of materials for students and the strategies needed to address student demand and retention are time consuming and could place further strains upon a

department that is small in staff numbers. Publicity and marketing are also required at postgraduate level with the expansion of the MA degrees with potential impacts for administrative staff.

Recommendation

We would recommend that the Department in discussion with the university management consider how additional marketing can be done with maximum impact without putting unbearable strain on administrative staff.

II (ii) Curriculum Design Postgraduate

(a) The Department is to be commended for developing its range of MA programmes which will increase student choice and therefore potentially enhance enrolments as evidenced in the increasing numbers in its three taught MA programmes: Diploma/MA, Anthropology of Ireland in a Global World; Anthropology of Development and Humanitarian World; and CREOLE. The internationalization of the MA programme through the CREOLE Bologna initiative is in its early days but has the potential to create international research-led impacts with its staff-student exchanges.

(b) The recognition of key opportunities amongst mature and return-to-education students is an important avenue of potential revenue and quality. Facilitating mature students through seminars held outside the working week at night time and on Saturdays can provide additional services for those who otherwise would have limited staff-student engagement. However, the department should be careful that it does not service the needs of one or two students for heavy staff time investment.

Recommendation

The balance between teaching input after hours and student enrolment on these modules needs to be monitored carefully to ensure that staff do not sacrifice essential research time for relatively small gains financially.

(c) There is an effective use of cross-teaching at different levels which use the same modules for third year as for the MA programmes. This has enabled a broader range of choice to be made available to postgraduate students.

Recommendation

As the taught MA programmes share the modules of the undergraduate degree, it was felt by some undergraduates that the high ratio of mature to young students sometimes brought an imbalance to the 'air time' of each group in lectures and tutorials and this may need to be better managed.

II (iii) Teaching and Assessing Student Learning

(a) There is a good use of external instruments of assessment and samples of marked work. However, the Department recognizes the need for a more harmonized review, involving targeting students at the end of each course as there is currently no collective way of evaluating teaching across the modules, and thus, there is therefore no systematic way to analyze what students want. Putting structures in place to address this is particularly important in terms of student retention and also in terms of student progress to MA programmes.

Recommendation

Some kind of review by coordinators of year programmes is needed to identify students performing exceptionally well or badly across courses. We would also support the department's intention to consider double marking of a random sample of final assessments

which would also go some way to assisting with providing consistency and evaluation of practices across modules.

(b) While the technological elements of teaching have increased substantially since the last review, it was noted that Moodle is only used by certain cohorts of students and while staff appreciate it as an administrative tool, there is still some skepticism amongst some staff about using Moodle for all elements of teaching, such as for online discussion forums and other e-learning exercises. A cautious approach to online learning is sensible since it can become the end rather than the means, but for particular modules there could be greater innovative or creative use of Moodle to enhance student-centred or practice-based learning experiences. Communication with students could also be facilitated by increased use of Moodle for access to online readings. While the library has clearly had some investment in terms of the transference of hard copy to e-journals, students report difficulty in accessing required materials. Some mature students requested the possibility of having greater computer training opportunities and for these to be made visible on Moodle by a link through which all support services were collated. It appears that the current centralised system is neither comprehensive nor consistently or effectively applied as a true performance management tool.

Recommendation

The University's central teaching unit might consider offering courses on sharing staff teaching experiences as well as having external practitioners workshop different potentialities of Moodle on a regular basis as part of staff development opportunities.

III RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

III (i) Research Strengths

The department houses faculty of international renown. The research records of staff are generally of high international standard. The department also has some of the more promising young talents in anthropology alongside established senior scholars. In this period of transition, there is a great window of opportunity for building on the capacities of each staff member. The department should do its best to make sure the capacities of each are realized and consolidated. Therefore, with the opportunity to revise the vision and future direction of the department, it would seem prudent to concentrate research efforts in particular areas. Currently there are a number of diverse networks and while diversity can be useful to tap into a range of grant opportunities, they may also distract from pooling research talents. A number of key links have been established with community organizations/NGOs creating grant opportunities in applied anthropology that should be nurtured and developed in the future around issues that can interlink and network staff interests. In terms of current research strengths, the inclusion of postdoctoral students on research projects enhances the staff ethos and it is commendable that postgraduates have some opportunities to be published.

III (ii) Shared Research Vision

While we have seen that staff are generally very much aware of the research profiles of their colleagues, and of the areas of expertise that these represent, there is little in the sense of a shared vision of research priorities within the department. We would recommend that the Department develop a shared research vision as part of the overall strategic plan by identifying, drawing together and enhancing their research strengths collectively.

Recommendation

The challenge is to articulate interlinkages and overlaps between the different research interests and to bring different specialties under the same umbrella while balancing them. We have seen that some of this work is already under way. Some key links have been established with community providers and public bodies for grant purposes in applied anthropology. There is the potential for this to expand although structurally this may prove problematic for some areas because of the demands of overheads for smaller community funding bodies.

We recommend that this process continues and is given support through open and frank discussion regarding the balance of task and process within the department.

IV LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Challenges and Opportunities

The following challenges and opportunities have been identified:

IV (i) Complexity

The increased complexity of the department creates greater diversity and variety in the teaching and research profile, which is a strong resource, but also creates some challenges at organizational levels. The department may want to put some structures and procedures in place to ensure the continued growth of the department, while keeping with the entrepreneurial and flexible spirit.

IV (ii) Consolidation

While there is ample evidence of extremely high levels of personal expertise in the completion of tasks in all areas of teaching, research and community involvement by all members of staff, the integration of these individual tasks into a coherent process, through which vision and mission can be translated into clear team objectives, values and required competency-sets, may need to be addressed. A more frequent application of quality team-time events will address the matter. An apparently trivial but actually quite significant example of this is the fact that the administration staff have not even seen, let alone been consulted on, the new building layout plans.

IV (iii) Communication

A friendly atmosphere, open channels of communication and flexible team working, characterize the department. Communication and decision making have been, and continue to be, quite informal, which generally facilitates swift and flexible problem solving and decision-making. These elements are further strengthened by the high degree of commitment of staff, and the degree of loyalty that we have seen. The department should try to maintain the informality and flexibility that characterizes social relations among staff and between staff and students, whilst securing more formal procedures for gathering views and experiences, and for passing on information. For example, as the department grows, it may not be evident to everyone how decisions are taken and how responsibilities and resources are allocated. Whilst there is generally a high degree of trusts in the department, this is being threatened by the very informality that characterizes the distribution of responsibilities, resources and mandates.

Putting changes in place and managing the change process is one issue (which is outlined below more fully in the areas for development below), but once this is satisfactorily achieved, the question of managing teaching and research issues and performance can be addressed more effectively.

V SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND EXEMPLARY PRACTICES

The warm welcome, total co-operation and enthusiasm from staff and students was indicative of much that was related in our meetings concerning the positive relationships within the department. One member of the staff described the ethos as that of a 'family' but also qualified this by indicating it paralleled a family that was able to operate as a 'team'. We recognize the motivation of staff, university support for the department and the overall vibrant ethos of teaching and research in which the programmes operate. It is clear that teaching within the department is professional and staff are enthusiastic and are experts on what they teach as reflected in increased availability of choice and potential to offer areas of specialist research.

- We have a positive view of the quality of UG teaching within the department which is delivered professionally and effectively. The range of choices mean that staff are enthusiastic about what they are able to teach and this is especially important in enabling staff to continue to carry out research-led teaching and explore the contemporary and cutting edge developments in their research with students.
- Key strengths of the programme lie in the diversity and extent of choice in offerings which are supported by the university through its open and flexible access to creating new pathways.
- Critical links have been established with EU and community organizations for grant purposes in applied anthropology and should be nurtured.
- The two day visiting staff programme is to be highly commended for its engagement of experts with staff and students in different research/teaching settings.
- Successful grant applications have included postgraduates and postdoctoral students.
- Administrative staff provide critical backup for both staff and students and manage their tasks efficiently in spite of the increasing pressures and burdens upon them.
- Innovative teaching initiatives that link with external educational bodies or other organizations have the potential to be exemplary models of research-led teaching by connecting academics with expert external practitioners.

VI AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

The ‘explosive’ growth in numbers over recent years has brought significant pressure (and in at least one case, transition of pressure into stress) to the work of those in the department. This has been felt at administrative, teaching, research and community involvement level and while it has, to date, been contained there is evidence that the situation is now stretched to absolute limit. Conscious action is required to address the risk that now exists of potential breakdown in the system. However, it is important to remember there are no standard solutions to perceived issues and it should be noted that our recommendations are offered, in the context of a Department that can be proud to have achieved much in a relatively short period of time. The reviewing team applaud the achievements made and respect the professional and generally well managed environment within which they operate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

VI (i) Reviewing Management Structures

The informal family-like, teamwork spirit of staff, with informal distribution of responsibility and authority, and a high degree of trust, is commendable. The balance between formal and informal management processes has worked (and currently still works) well. However, once again, the growth may have taxed this arrangement close to the limit and the need to raise the question of on-going management style, culture and structure to a conscious level is paramount. The observations made would indicate that specific individual tasks continue to be achieved, although time pressures may have impacted on both priorities and comprehensive coverage. However, the potential for bringing tasks together under the cloak of effective and efficient processes is beginning to be compromised. This may indicate a need for change in the balance of formal and informal processes resulting from the now significantly larger headcount of both staff and students.

In the absence of more formal procedures there may be a risk that areas of potential discontent will not be dealt with appropriately and in a timely fashion which could undermine the strong esprit de corps that is evident in the Department. As previously mentioned, a conscious awareness of personal behavioural styles and needs of staff members may now need to be considered as the department grows to a size where changes in management style and culture will inevitably occur through evolution. For example, changes in central policy have impacted on ‘teamliness’ at departmental level, as instanced by changes in the transparency of hiring

procedures. It may be necessary to bring these issues to the fore and discuss how such imposed restrictions can be managed within the team, rather than allowing such changes to drive levels of dissatisfaction. Change management is a complex competency and orchestrating effective change will require close examination of the maturity of the team, style of leadership, team culture, clarity of objectives, and understanding of individual team member behavioural preferences. Specifically within this change management framework we would offer the following suggestions for consideration:

- The need to address a required shift in the balance between ‘family’ norms and ‘team’ norms, as a basis for efficient and effective inter-personal and group communications, was directly raised or implied in various guises. This is a topic that might usefully be explored and addressed within more formalised quality-team-time events.
- Allied to the ‘family’ v. ‘team’ norms re-balance there maybe a specific requirement to raise conscious awareness, in the now expanded team, of different behavioural patterns and the consequent communication style preferences (e.g. – some like infinite detail, others like broad picture outlines). Understanding such variances is a foundation stone in the development of teamwork, to avoid needs frustration and conflicts of attitude.
- With regards to informality, postgraduate students are in a particularly vulnerable situation. Generally, they rely heavily on the good will and accessibility of their supervisors. In broad terms, this seems to be working out well. However, there is no corporate body that caters particularly to the need of this student body. Their experiences and views on the education and research profile are highly important, yet there are no formal ways through which these may be gathered and followed up. Participation and involvement in the ‘management’ of the department was something to which postgraduates and postdoctoral fellows felt they would like to have greater access. We would thus recommend that the department find ways to make sure the voice(s) of postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows are heard and recognized in a formal sense. We recommend that the department facilitate the organization of a postgraduate staff-student committee and that the Department might consider inviting a representative of the research Postgraduates to attend Department meetings and be offered the opportunity to have a regular postgraduate item on the agenda.
- In a period of growth and transition, however, areas of responsibility as well as authority need to be given clearer contours, and clarified. The department may want to put some procedures in place to make sure that objectives and processes are made visible and legible, and that decision-making is open in character. This should preferably be done at early stage, in order to secure the trust between colleagues. Also the department would benefit from allocating and rotating responsibilities and mandates amongst staff to a greater extent, so that the full potential of staff members is harnessed.
- Key objectives could be more clearly set out in terms of monitoring and evaluating staff achievements as well as teaching goals. Competency development is not addressed adequately, if at all. It may be that the Department should consider the benefits of introducing some form of internal performance management process. Some staff were particularly keen to have processes put in place for internal discussions about personal objective setting in all areas of teaching, research and admin in order to meet their developmental needs and aspirations in light of impacts accruing from the teaching and research environment. It may also be worth discussing

VI (ii) Issues in the Development of a Strategic Plan

As Anthropology gains popularity amongst students, a question was raised regarding how increasing student numbers might be better managed against available resources and this is a matter for staff discussion. Some issues may also benefit from soliciting the views of undergraduate and postgraduate student representative:

- While the self-assessment document recognizes seven main areas of research foci, a strategic plan, addressing the research directions in which the department aims to go, as well as how to get there, may prove valuable. Within this research strategy, the research-led teaching vision and goals of the department may be outlined and related to those of the university. Key steps to be taken on the way to achieving specific research goals may be identified and articulated. We recommend that these steps be clarified and communicated in a strategic plan.
- In considering this strategic plan, the department should reflect on the balance of consolidating research areas whilst maintaining diversity in a way that harnesses research-led teaching strengths. The department already has proven research grant success in development, medical anthropology and migration. Other areas worthy of support are language, culture and performance, and material culture and there is the potential to develop research networks around these research strengths as well as incorporating them strategically within teaching programmes. If this is done at an early stage of growth, the department can evade the risk of becoming a 'research hotel' of successful individuals, and instead consolidate a high profile environment of critical research engagement in particular areas. Innovative teaching practices should also be considered in this research-led teaching nexus.
- Communication, as ever, is probably the area that suffered the highest level of criticism. It was evident that increasing pressures of workloads are threatening to have escalating negative effects on the validity of informal communication channels, which have been historically (and are currently) being used to address certain issues. The departmental meeting also appears as an important locus for the sharing of information. However, the format and frequency of this meeting may be reflected upon.
- The opinion was expressed that, with a little more pro-active management, resources such as email, the department website, and Moodle, might be employed to much greater and more consistent effect. The lack of a wireless connection was also mentioned on a number of occasions as a barrier to information dissemination and retrieval.
- Student resources and facilities were identified as substandard. In particular the student 'common room' was described as 'a smelly dungeon' with no comfort, no refreshment facilities, no wireless internet connection, insufficient computers and frequently not even available for use as it was taken over for some other purpose. Some postgraduates who had connections through NIRSA were particularly supportive of the arrangements for their postgraduates and wanted to see similar facilities made available to anthropology.
- Irrespective of a formalised student representative body, it was felt that even an informal student 'voice' was impossible without a place to meet. Without such meeting facilities and the ensuing discussion that would be generated, co-ordinated

- Similarly there was consensus that a communal social space is needed for staff and that this should be made a high priority. It was also raised as a matter of priority in 2001.

VI (iii) Administrative Streamlining

Some additional administrative procedures may need to be put in place to rationalize administrative staff time. While administrative staff show a great deal of capacity to deal flexibly with upcoming challenges and problems, as the department grows, flexibility and good will may not be enough to secure the maximum efficiency of administrative procedures.

- Identifying key problems and addressing administrative burdens that may be managed either elsewhere or by investing in additional resources will aid in saving time and effort amongst administrative staff which are now being stretched to the limit.
- Procedures for dealing with large and unwieldy tasks such as enrolment and receiving essays may make decision making processes clearer to those not directly involved in administrative decisions. Some streamlining of the electronic system for emailing students regarding tutorials appears to be needed.
- Administrative staff highlighted the lack of time to attend to MA postgraduates because of excessive undergraduate demands as well as the increasing demands made upon them by the use of Moodle by lecturers.
- Suggestions were made regarding the possibility for the central information technology system to develop more coordinated systems on Moodle and also for additional induction and training.

The Anthropology Department within NUIM is unique; it exhibits unique issues, which require unique solutions to be developed by their equally unique team. If there is any further clarity required around any of the above, or if any further assistance can be given in translation of recommendations into actions we will be pleased to be of help. It is our wish to see an already strong team, with significant accomplishments to its credit, climb to greater heights of achievement.

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